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WESTERN ACES

AUGUST

SCAPEGOAT OF SUNSTONE HILLS

BY J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

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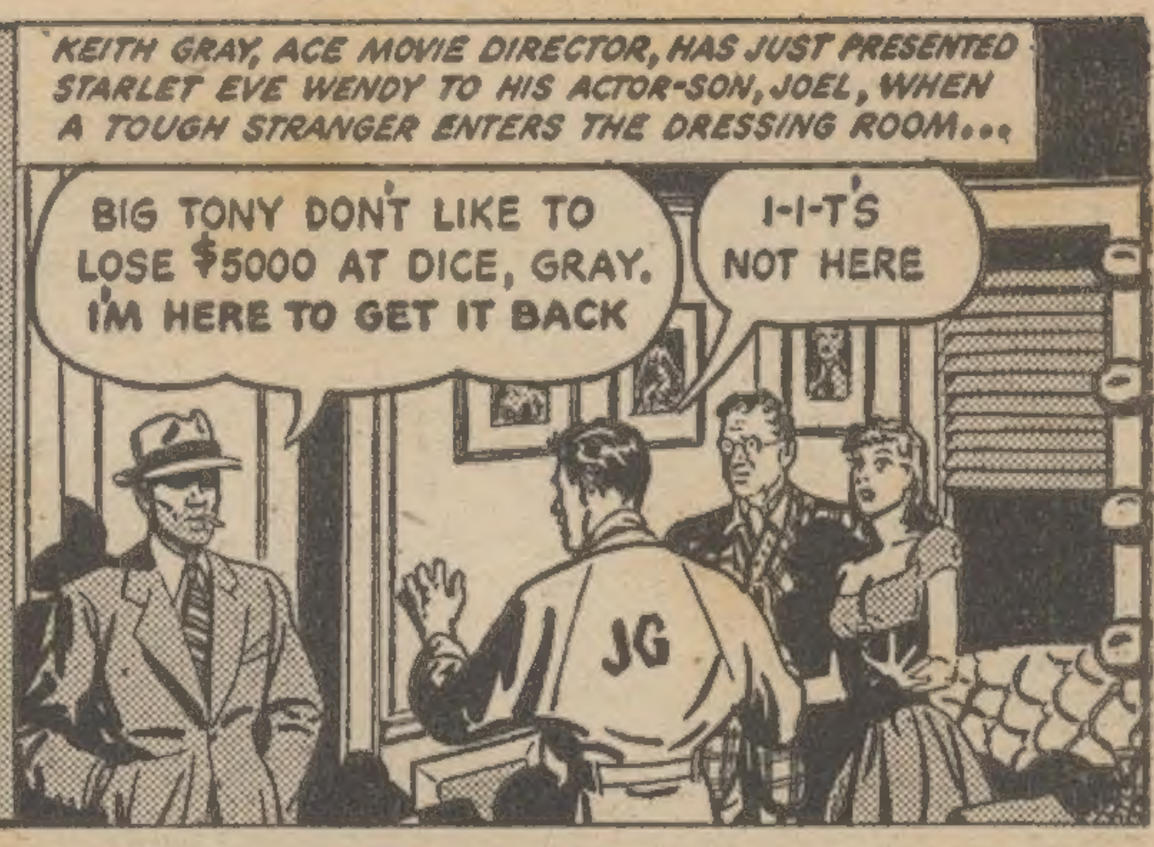

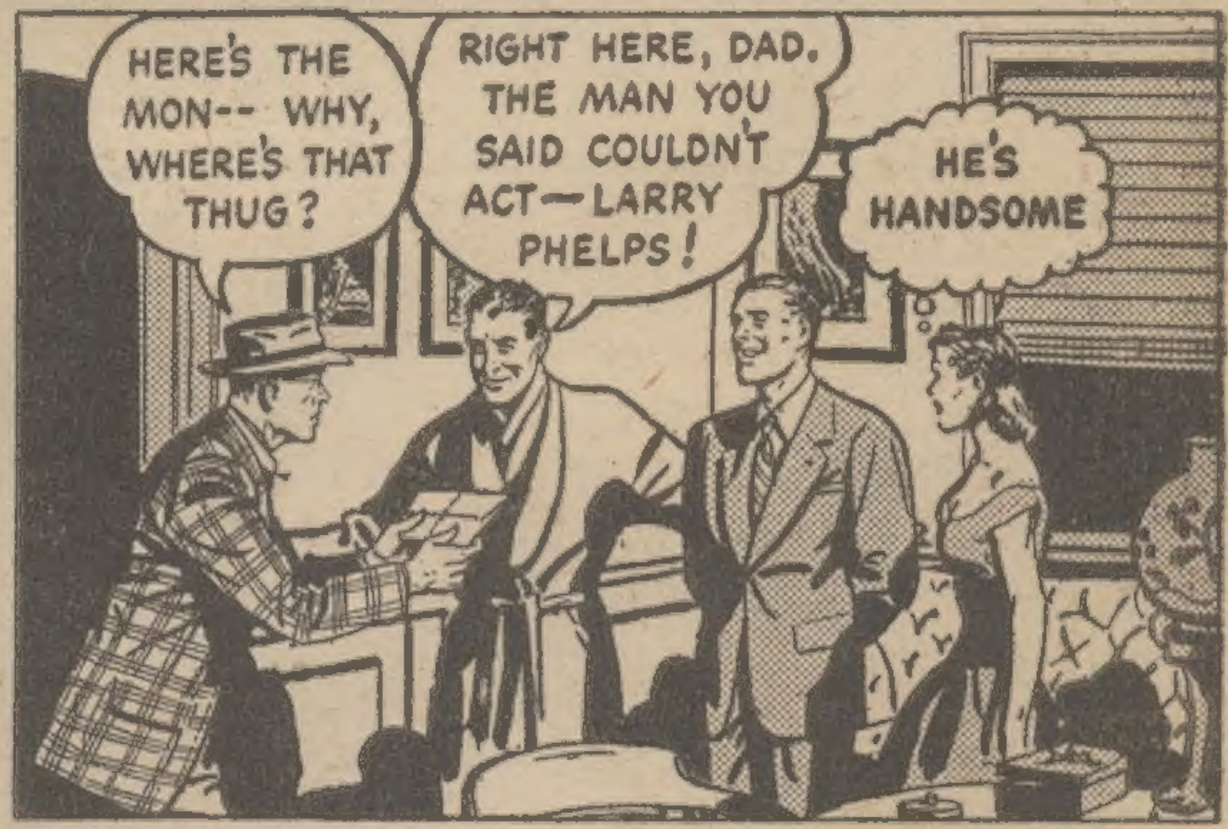

AUGUST
1946

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No. 3

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Published bi-monthly by Periodical House, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington Street, Springfield 3, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y., A. A. Wyn, President. Entered as second class matter on September 14, 1936, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered at U.S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1946, by Periodical House, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y. Yearly Subscription, 60 cents; Single Copies, 10 cents. Please send all subscriptions and correspondence relating to subscriptions to Periodical House, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.

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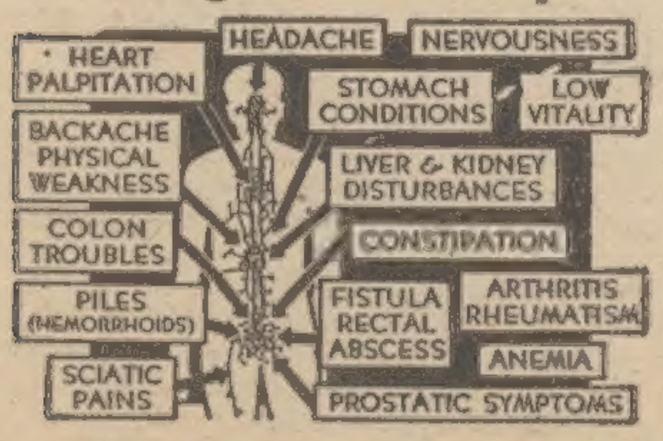

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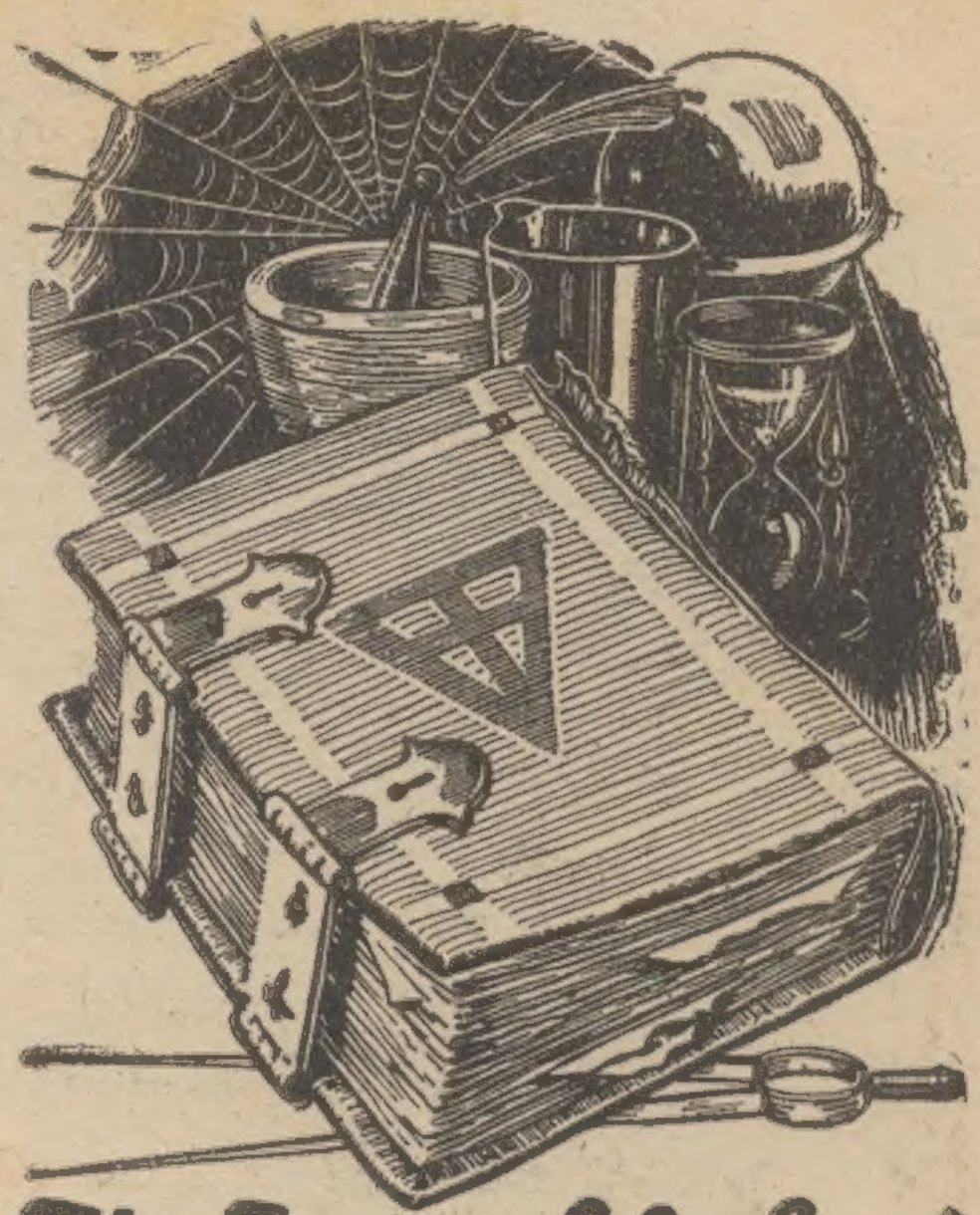

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Scapegoat of

CHAPTER I

THE oldster in flop-brimmed hat, levis and cowhide boots didn't look as if he had the price of a drink. The frowning bartender knew him as Seth Hazen, a sodbuster from up the range, who seldom patronized the Ace Saloon in Burnt Ridge. All set to tell him he couldn't bum a drink, the barman's eyes widened as old Seth produced a small buckskin pouch, undid the drawstring and shook glittering flakes into a work-hardened palm.

"Gold!" exclaimed the bartender. "Where'd you get it, Seth?"

"Thought I was broke, didn't you?" sneered Hazen. "Never mind where it came from. I ain't had a jag on since I dunno when, but tonight I'm tankin' up. I gotta. Dry weather's ruint my crops, both my plow horses died of snakebite, and the shack caught fire this mornin'. Bad luck's always doggin' me. Got gold scales to weigh this stuff?"

"No," said the barman. "Ain't had need of 'em since I worked here."

At that moment a cold-eyed, black-mustached man in Stetson, corduroys and high-laced boots moved down the bar to

Sunstone Hills

Great Outlaw Novelette

By J. Edward Leithead

★ ★ ★

Lash Cargile had his gun work cut out for him when he sided that old sodbuster to protect a 24-carat cache. For the nugget trail flung them into an owlhoot hideout where gold-mad marauders forced them to ride a shooting-iron gantlet.

Hazen's side. "Struck it rich, Hazen?" he asked in a penetrating voice.

A cowpuncher at the far end of the bar had turned sideways when the bartender mentioned gold. He was wide-shouldered, slim-hipped, gray with trail dust from rolled-brim hat to spurred boots. Lash Cargile had tied up at the Ace hitchrack but ten minutes since. The lights of Burnt Ridge had been a welcome sight to a man who had traveled for two days through rolling sagebrush country, inhabited only by occasional groups of longhorns.

Burnt Ridge was the sort of town where stockmen would congregate and Cargile needed work. But why ride herd for some crusty cow boss if there'd been a gold discovery? Lash waited eagerly for Hazen's answer to the man in the corduroys.

"A foolish question, Trask!" the oldster shook his head. "Do I look like a feller who'd stubbed his toe on a bonanza?"

"You don't," admitted Curt Trask, agent for the Longbow Stage and Express Company, "and that's why I'm curious. We're losin' a lot of dust through holdups along the line. You've seen the reward notices for 'Rowdy' Dillon or any of his gang, dead or alive? That dust you've got could be some that was taken from our strongboxes, shipped by the Cactus Hill Minin' Company. Tell me where you got it, Hazen, pronto!"

The sodbuster poured the yellow grains back into his poke, glaring defiantly. "I don't have to tell you nothin', Trask! It's mine. I came by it honestly, a long time ago, a good many miles from here. You got no right to talk like I was a thief."

Trask's face was a menacing mask. "I know you couldn't hold up a coach by yourself. But Dillon loses a man now and then; no doubt takes others into his gang to replace them. If your homestead ain't pannin' out, you'd be ripe to take a hand in Rowdy's holdup game. You and your daughter need money to live—Don't touch that gun!" the agent crackled suddenly, backing off and throwing hand to hip.

Hazen wasn't fast enough. His Colt was still in its worn scabbard when he found himself looking into the muzzle of Trask's death tube. The swinging doors flapped and a beefy star-badger stood in the glare of the hanging lamps. The express agent flicked an eye at him.

"Just the man I want to see, Pilger! Here's that homesteader, Hazen, with a poke of gold dust he can't account for to my satisfaction."

"One of Rowdy's men maybe!" exclaimed Sheriff Pilger, moving briskly barward and unshipping his gun. "All I need is one of that gang to work on and I'll lay the rest by the heels!"

LASH CARGILE pitied the oldster, who volubly protested any connection with the road agent band. Whether he was speaking the truth or not, lawman and express agent seemed certain of his guilt. Scanning the faces of bystanders, Cargile saw none that expressed either doubt or sympathy. Maybe they were right, but it angered Lash to see the old man roughly handled. Sheriff Pilger snatched away his poke and swung him around toward the door.

Hastily gulping the last drink he had poured, Cargile joined the crowd that trailed the sheriff and his prisoner. Pilger told Trask to fetch along the homesteader's horse from the tie rack. A few doors above the saloon, the head of the procession halted as a girl rode up to the curb and flung herself from the saddle.

Cargile shouldered his way through the growing crowd until close enough to observe the pretty, distracted face revealed in the yellow patch of light from a store window. Her wide-brimmed hat had fallen from luxuriant brown hair and hung by the chin thongs. At the moment her dark eyes were wide with fear and small fists gripped the bib of Hazen's overalls.

"What've you done, Dad?" she cried. "You haven't had time to get drunk, for I followed you as soon as I discovered you'd taken our little reserve fund."

"There you are, Pilger!" exclaimed Hazen. "She means the gold dust. Now maybe you'll believe me. The sheriff and Trask, Judy, think I got that yellow stuff in a stage holdup."

"Why—" the girl faced Pilger with flaming cheeks—"that's ridiculous! Long before we came to this range, Dad was a prospector. But all the gold he ever found was that little pokeful, and at last he gave up trying. Not that homesteading has proved much better."

Sheriff Pilger looked unimpressed. "Of course, you'd lie for him, bein' his daughter. But there's ways of gettin' at the truth. I'm the laughin' stock of the county because I ain't rounded up them road agents, and I'm not lettin' this chance slip. It looks bad for your old man, Miss Hazen. You come along, too," Pilger grasped her arm. "Between the two of you, we'll get at the bottom of this. Trask, bring her horse, will you?"

The procession moved on to the adobe jail. Trask hitched both broncs in front, brushed by Cargile as he made for the doorway, around which the crowd milled. Two deputy sheriffs had made their appearance and began pushing back the citizens who sought entrance at Pilger's heels. Trask was permitted to pass inside.

Lash Cargile didn't like the setup. After seeing Judy Hazen, he believed in her father's innocence. The grilling of the oldster would probably be accompanied by brutality, since the sheriff didn't want the townsmen to witness it. The Hazens stood in need of a friend, and Lash made up his mind on the instant. As the last deputy was backing through the jail doorway, Cargile approached, crooking a finger at him.

"What you want?" the star-badger demanded gruffly, peering at the stranger. He was about Cargile's height, wore a rolled-brim hat and brush jacket.

"Come around in the alley," Lash returned in a low voice. "It's important."

The deputy was curious. "Back in a minute," he called over his shoulder, and, leaving the door ajar, jingled after Cargile, who was rolling a quick quirly as he moved on into the alley. The disappointed townsmen had started back to the Ace Saloon, to drink and speculate upon the result of Sodbuster Hazen's grilling.

Cargile lit his cigarette and faced about, halfway down the alley. The deputy was coming, gun in hand. He paused within arm's reach of the cowboy, demanding, "What's all the pussyfootin' for, stranger?"

Lash took the glowing cigarette from his lips with his left hand. "You want to catch Rowdy Dillon's gang, don't you?"

"I reckon we've got one of 'em!" the star-badger snapped.

"I figure you're wrong," said Lash, and the hand holding the quirly suddenly pressed the hot end against the wrist of the lawman's dangling gun-arm. He dropped the six-shooter with an oath. Cargile's right hand jerked up from the region of his belt, steel-laden, before the lawman could jump back. The Colt barrel whacked him on the head and he reeled against the jail wall. Lash swung again as he was falling, just to make sure.

STOOPING over the crumpled form, Cargile swiftly removed the brush jacket, with the deputy's star pinned to it. The jacket was a rather loose fit. He didn't change hats, for both were the rolled-brim type. It wasn't much of a disguise, but Lash thought it would serve his purpose for a short time if he didn't stand directly in the light. Having no means of tying the lawman, but pretty sure he would be out for a long count, Cargile pitched the star-badger's Colt onto the jail roof and stalked back to the street entrance.

His hatbrim was pulled low in front as he stepped past the door, not quite closing it. Nobody in the sheriff's office looked at him. Old Seth's hands had been bound. Trask and the sheriff were snarling threats in his face as he steadily affirmed his innocence. A few feet away stood the ashen-lipped Judy, with the other deputy's restraining hand on her shoulder.

"You'll have to beat the truth out of this mule, Pilger!" snarled the express agent.

The sheriff nodded, slipped around behind his desk and opened a drawer. He came back with a length of rubber hose, and Lash Cargile's eyes narrowed. The cowboy began a sidling movement while Pilger shook the instrument of torture under Seth's nose.

"Last call, Hazen! You confess or—"

"He's not a thief! I tell you, he's not!" cried Judy.

Sheriff Pilger's arm rose and fell. The smiting hose almost knocked the sodbuster down. Blood trickling along one side of his face, he glared at the sheriff, shouting:

"You dirty coward!"

"Still mule-jawed!" ground out Trask. "Give him some more!"

Putting increased vigor into the second blow, Sheriff Pilger smashed Seth

to his knees. Judy was screaming, giving the deputy sheriff all he could do to hold her. Suddenly the sheriff froze with right arm lifted for a third stroke. The cold ring of a gun muzzle was pressing against his neck.

"Can't stand for beatin' an old man to death, not if he's robbed a dozen coaches!" rapped Cargile. "And I'm bettin' he got the yellow stuff where he says. Don't move, Pilger—or you, Trask!"

The express agent had half turned, flicking startled eyes at the cowpuncher. "It's somebody wearin' McNab's jacket and badge, Pilger!"

"No friend of Dillon's if that's what you're thinkin'," said Lash. "Just struck town tonight. Deputy, release Miss Hazen!" The man addressed instantly relaxed his grip and the girl sprang to her father's side. "Help the old man to the horses," Cargile went on, "and ride south. I'll cover you."

Judy gave him a quick look, moved doorward with the oldster leaning heavily on her shoulder. As they disappeared, Lash, using his free hand, yanked the guns from Pilger's and Trask's holsters, tossed the weapons behind the desk. He ordered the scowling deputy to heave his gun out of immediate reach and it was done. Then Cargile stepped around the harshly breathing pair and backed toward the open door, his Colt threatening all three bristling men.

As he stepped onto the platform, he caught the tinkle of spurs close by. Before he could turn, powerful arms clamped him from behind. The pistol-whipped deputy, who had recovered sooner than Lash expected, was snarling in his ear:

"Got you now, you tricky polecat!"

While they scuffled, Lash, fearful that the Hazens would delay and be retaken, yelled, "Don't wait for me, Miss Judy! Streak it out of here!" Though he couldn't see them, he heard horses' hoofs stir to a swift clatter, going southward. Pilger, Trask, and the other deputy bounced out of the jail at that moment. A shot echoed, evidently directed at the fleeing Hazens.

Pilger leaped down to the sidewalk to give McNab a hand. Cargile slammed a boot into the sheriff's stomach and he fell backward, hitting his head on the edge of the stoop. With a violent twist of his hard-muscled body, Lash broke McNab's hold, pitched quick shots at Trask and the second deputy, and darted down the sidewalk.

CHAPTER II

THE hubbub had drawn citizens from the Ace Saloon and elsewhere. They were heading for the jail at a run, and Cargile, seeing that he was cut off from his horse, dodged aside into the alley. Running at top speed he emerged from the lower end with chin on shoulder, observing dark forms crowding down the passageway. The next minute he stepped into space and fell flat in the bottom of a shallow depression. He was picking himself up as boots pounded at the alley's mouth and someone warned, "Watch out for that hole!"

The cowboy flattened again. They hadn't seen him tumble into the depression. While he lay still, seven or eight men skirted the gully and plunged on, seeking their quarry in the brush heaps beyond. Waiting until the last man thudded past, Cargile cautiously raised his head, then got to his feet, ripping off the brush jacket. He scuttled to the rear of the saloon, thence to the front of the building. The street was deserted except for men noisily mounting by the jail to pursue the Hazens.

Lash made for his horse at the saloon rack, crossed to the south side of town without raising an outcry. The darkness swallowed up horse and rider. As he galloped, Lash bent an ear for hoofbeats that would put him on the trail of Hazen and his daughter. The wind-drifted rataplan, when he caught it, indicated they hadn't got as far from Burnt Ridge as they should in the interval since he had admonished them to "streak it." He learned the reason for this as he overtook the fleeing pair. Seth's horse had been partly disabled by the shot fired as they were quitting Burnt Ridge.

"What are we going to do?" the girl exclaimed. "It's hardly safe to go back to our homestead, and there's not much left but a few farming tools since the cabin burned. We're very grateful to you, stranger, for—"

"My name's Lash Cargile," said the cowboy. "I'm in this jackpot with you and no regrets on that score. First off we've got to outrun the posse that's com-

in' after us. Not so easy to do with the oldster's bronc slowin' down. Keep ridin' while we talk."

Judy had untied her father's hands, so that he could guide his mount, but he hadn't fully recovered from the beating and was in a terrible state of mind. He'd never stolen anything in his life, he told Cargile.

"Not hard for me to believe," replied Lash, "and it's a wonder they didn't, unless they're tryin' to cover up somethin'. That Trask has a bad eye and the sheriff is plumb brutal. Listen, folks! Hoofbeats! Still far off, but if we can hear them, they're bound to hear us, too."

They covered a mile without increasing their lead, on account of Seth's lagging animal. Pounding into a ravine, the horses were brought to a plunging halt as five men suddenly blocked the way with leveled six-guns. To the left, a small fire burned beneath an overhanging rock, concealed from view until the three riders pulled up opposite the projection.

"Where you ridin' so fast, hombres?" inquired a youthful voice. Its rasping tone changed to add, "Excuse me, miss. Didn't see one of you was a lady."

Cargile reached for his gun. He sat his fretting horse with fingers still clasping the butt as the speaker moved into the firelight, his mates shuffling after him. Not more than twenty, the young man had longish, curly dark hair. His face was thin and hard, until he smiled, a quirking up of the lips which displayed even teeth and rendered his features less harsh. He wore crossed gunbelts, gripped a .45 in each fist, the barrels sagging as he looked the trio over.

"WE'RE not worth holdin' up, fellow," said Cargile. "In fact, there's a sheriff's posse on our back trail."

"Yeh?" The younger man's eyes snapped wider. "You folks don't exactly look like law-busters."

"We're in wrong, just the same," returned Lash. "The oldster, here, was mistaken for one of Rowdy Dillon's gang." Cargile's gaze was intent on the sharp features, for he suspected the other's identity.

"I'm Rowdy Dillon," the young man said, a flicker of amusement in his eyes, "and I can swear the ol' man never belonged to my outfit."

"Would you swear it to Sheriff Pilger and Curt Trask, the express agent, get 'em off my neck?" Seth asked eagerly.

"Not me," said Rowdy. "I wouldn't risk gettin' that close to 'em."

"It wouldn't do any good, either," broke in Cargile. "Not right now. Dillon, old man Hazen's horse is on its last legs. Hit by a bullet. That posse is comin' up fast—"

"We might ambush 'em," Rowdy said, with a tigerish look. "You've got a gun and can help us."

"Don't want to get in any deeper than I am," Lash stated firmly.

Rowdy Dillon glanced at Judith Hazen and suddenly scabbarded his guns. "The girl might stop a lead chunk, too. We'll run for it together. Happens one of my boys was salivated this afternoon, but we have his horse. Hazen can ride it."

The hoofbeats of the posse were much closer as Cargile and the Hazens resumed flight in the company of the road agents, bearing southward. Dillon said he was taking them to the only place in the country where lawmen wouldn't follow. Cargile thought it sounded ominous, but with himself and the Hazens, it was a case of any port in a storm. After an hour of swift going, the party checked rein to listen. The sound of pursuit had died out.

"Lost 'em," chuckled Rowdy. "No use wearin' the horses down more'n we have to. It's still a good ride to where we're headin'."

When next they halted, the face of the land had changed from billowing plain to rock-ribbed, hilly terrain. Rounding the shoulder of a hill, two yellow squares of light emphasized the black hulk of a big adobe. The door swung open, spilling forth a noisy crowd, which swarmed around the dismounting horsemen. Lash Cargile saw Judy Hazen's eyes turned anxiously toward him and he strode to her side, whispering:

"Take it easy. I don't figure we'll be any worse off than at Burnt Ridge."

Rowdy Dillon raised his voice. "Boys, we have visitors, one of 'em a lady. Clean up that back room and put a cot in it. Miss Hazen, step up and let the boys have a look at you."

Lash pressed the girl's hand before she moved away to stand full in the light

from the open door. The outlaws stared in open admiration, voiced a rough chorus of welcome, to which Judy replied in a faint voice and retired to the rimming gloom, where her father and Cargile waited. A card game had been in progress when the riders came in, but, at Rowdy's order, it was not resumed that night. Evidently, thought Lash, he was trying to make a good impression on the girl.

Next morning, Judith had her nervousness under sufficient control to offer to help with the breakfast. Rowdy placed her at one end of the long table, sat at the other himself. He asked for particulars of the trouble that had caused the Hazens and Cargile to flee the town. Lash did most of the talking, with old Seth now and then interjecting a word.

"Why, Pilger and Trask ought to be skinned alive!" exclaimed Rowdy virtuously. "I think Trask's lookin' for a scapegoat to cover his own crookedness, and the reason I do is because the last four or five times we held up coaches there wasn't any gold aboard. Robbed the company's strongboxes himself, I figure, hopin' we'd get the blame."

CARGILE nodded slowly. "I had a feelin' myself he wasn't straight. But Hazen and I have no better chance of provin' it than you, Dillon."

"If you folks don't know it, you're in the Sunstone Hills," said Rowdy. "The hidin' place of all the owlhooters for miles around. Most of the gangs have 'dobes like ours. It would take an army to dislodge us, because these hills are easily defended. You three are welcome to stay long as you like. I reckon you and the old man, Lash, are in the same fix with the law as me and my bunch. You'd be crazy to go where Pilger and Trask could lay hands on you."

"I think you're right, for the present anyway," Lash answered soberly. "The only hitch is, I don't like to accept a man's hospitality without makin' some return. And I'm not minded to join you robbin' coaches."

"I ain't askin' you. If Judy Hazen's stayin'—" Rowdy flashed his winning smile at the girl—"that's all I care about, and she'll be treated like a lady."

"I certainly wouldn't desert my father," Judith said warmly.

The old man looked as if he were going to say something, but his lips remained sealed. Circumstances over which he had no control had brought them to this pass. Lash had small doubt he could make his getaway any time he chose, but while Judith and her father were guests of the owlhooters he was sticking with them.

Rowdy expressed his pleasure at their decision. He pushed his chair back from the table, got out the makings. As he sifted tobacco into a paper, he looked at Seth. "Where'd you say you got that dust of yours?"

"A pocket I found when I was prospectin'," replied Hazen.

"If you were a prospector, then you know gold when you see it." Dillon crushed the cigarette paper and rose. He went to a bunk at the side of the room and returned with pieces of ore, which he heaped on the table in front of Hazen. "Is that the real thing or just iron pyrites, old-timer? I'll admit I don't know and had no chance to find out unless I wanted to run a gantlet of shootin'-irons."

As Seth picked up a sample and scanned it, all the men at the table, even Cargile, leaned forward to hear his pronouncement. Seth hefted the yellow-veined specimen, laid it down and went through the same process with the other pieces of rock. His breath was coming hard; there was a glow in his eyes that everyone saw and couldn't fail to read.

"It's gold!" whooped Rowdy Dillon, smashing both fists on the table.

"Yessir," declared Seth huskily, "that's mighty good-lookin' float. You show me where you found it and I'll show you a promisin' gold claim!"

"It ain't far from here!" roared Rowdy, snatching up his sombrero. "And it ain't the only spot in the hills where there's more of the same kind of rock. Every owlhoot band has showed me specimens one time or another, wonderin' if it really was gold."

Seth himself was first out of the door, the gold fever gripping him again. The room quickly emptied of outlaws, all talking like crazy men, but Lash Cargile turned to the girl before he followed them.

"This means more trouble," he said, "but it may be a break for us. These outlaws'll have a hot time operatin' a gold mine. Comin' along to see the fun?"

"I'd just as well, I guess," replied Judy. "But, Lash, I'm afraid of that Rowdy Dillon, in spite of the manners he's put on."

" 'Put on' is right, Judy. He's a *malo hombre*. But would you rather be here or in the Burnt Ridge jail? I'm not sure but your father would 'a' been beaten to death or hung. Anyway, if it'll be any comfort, I won't be far from you until the three of us leave here together."

She stood looking up at him. "It is comforting to know that, Lash. A friend like you, appearing out of the night, just when we needed one the most."

"It was my luck as much as yours," grinned Lash. "Let's see what those wild men are yellin' about."

They found old Seth and the Dillon gang scrabbling among the rocks, a couple of hundred yards from the rear of the big 'dobe. Through the rubble of quartz, which he declared high grade, Hazen traced down the outcropping and said excitedly:

"Here's where we have to dig, boys! Got any tools? Even if it's only half as good below as what it is on the surface, you've got somethin'!"

CHAPTER III

ROWDY DILLON slammed his hat on the ground, stifling an oath as he noted Judy's presence. "We ain't got a thing to dig with!"

"You'll need giant powder, too," said Seth. "It's a hard rock proposition, not placer gold, no tellin' how many feet to the mother vein. Yessir, you'll have to sink a shaft, and when you take the ore out, you'll want a stamp mill to crush it."

The young outlaw looked around at his bug-eyed mates. "We need a lot of things we haven't got right now. But we'll get 'em somehow."

Word that Rowdy Dillon's quartz rock was genuine gold spread rapidly through the Sunstone Hills. Outlaw bands began drifting to the Dillon 'dobe, bringing samples from their own camp sites for Seth Hazen to examine. Without exception he pronounced them high grade. The owlhooters were amazed to learn there was more gold in their stamping ground than they could possibly gather by years of plundering outside.

The irony of it was that they couldn't mine the metal. They had no tools, they couldn't register the claims, or if they did, wouldn't be allowed to keep them because of their outlawed status. Road agents, train robbers, cattle and horse thieves, and just plain killers, most of them were slated for the gallows if caught.

But Rowdy said there was a way to lick the problem confronting them. They could do their mining in secret if they had tools and wagons to carry the ore to the stamp mill at Cactus Hill, north of Burnt Ridge.

"Your talk is good medicine, Rowdy," said a train robber, Jug Buckalew, "if you'll just tell us where to get them tools and wagons."

The afternoon had waned as the outlaws discussed the situation in front of Dillon's 'dobe, with half a hundred saddled horses near by. Before Rowdy could answer Buckalew, a distant cracking of whips, explosive as pistol shots, attracted the assemblage.

"Train of freight wagons," said Lash to Judy, pointing to the long jerklines of mules and huge, tarp-covered vehicles coming through a gap in the hills northward. "Seems to me they're takin' a mighty big risk of bein' raided to drive through this bandit-ridden strip."

Rowdy's voice rose in a shout. "It's Mitch Kirkwood's outfit, boys! Can't let him get by without payin' toll!"

While his road agents hurried around to the corral behind the 'dobe, the young outlaw pushed through the crowd to Lash and Judy.

"Get your horses," he said. "We're all ridin' out to meet Mitch."

Judy clung to Lash's arm. "I'll stay here, thank you. I'm not at all anxious to witness any killing."

"Nor me," said Lash grimly.

Rowdy laughed. "Won't be any killin'. Kirkwood has been freightin' through here a long time and never been raided. 'Cause why? He outfits us with anything we need, food, clothin', even booze. Mitch figures, sensibly, that it's cheaper to give us the little we ask for and have safe passage through the Sunstones, than to refuse and lose everything. Maybe you'd like the goods for a new dress, Judy. He has bolts of—"

"What I have will do for the present," the girl interrupted.

"You and Seth come anyway, Lash," said Rowdy. "If you can't think of nothin'

else you want, there'll be whisky to drink."

All the outlaws were swinging to saddles. Rowdy's gang reappeared, mounted and leading extra horses. Lash, Rowdy, and old Seth stepped into leather. Dillon yelled as the cavalcade started:

"Mitch never carries minin' tools, and don't nobody mention the big strike to him. He'd be sure to broadcast it and the whole county would stampede in here to chase us out."

RIDING between Dillon and Hazen, Cargile saw the wagons slow to a grinding stop, half a mile from the outlaw abode. The mule skinners dropped from the saddle-wheelers of their ten-mule strings. None of them reached for a weapon or seemed in the least disturbed at the approach of the wild-riding horsemen. It eased Cargile's mind, for he hadn't been sure Rowdy was speaking the truth. A bearded giant on a big saddle mule rode out from the wagons, raising his hand in salute, though Lash could see he wasn't very happy at the meeting.

"Never let me slip past without a hold-up, do you, boys?" the big fellow boomed.

"You've got no kick comin', Mitch," returned Rowdy boisterously. "Ain't lost a wagonload of goods since you been usin' our private road. Sure can't call it robbery if you give us stuff."

"I know what'd happen if I didn't," said the boss freighter glumly. "Say, you're all here tonight, ain't you? Must've knowed I was drivin' this way from the railroad. Plenty of whisky in the wagons."

The outlaws hit the ground and crowded about the nearest wagons, from which tight-lipped skinners and their helpers began unloading boxes and barrels. Cargile and Hazen held aloof, standing by their horses. Mitch Kirkwood himself broached a keg of whisky and passed around tin cups. As it grew dark and the outlaws still lingered by the wagons, fires of mesquite roots were kindled.

Rowdy Dillon, missing the cowboy and the sodbuster from the groups around the fires, went in search of them. "Come on up and wet your whistles," he urged. "It don't cost nothin'."

Lash and old Seth accompanied him to the nearest fire. Kirkwood was reluctantly tapping another cask as the thirsty mob emptied the first one. Cargile, as he drank, noticed Jug Buckalew, the train robber, wasn't carrying his liquor well. He lurched up to Mitch, thrusting out his tin cup.

"Mitch," babbled Jud, "have you ever thought there might be gold in this country?"

"You mean here in the hills? Naw!" Kirkwood shook his head.

Dillon's voice rang sharply, "Jug, you're drinkin' too heavy!"

"Shut up, Rowdy!" snapped the train robber. "You ain't my boss!" He dug a fragment of rock from his coat pocket. "Give that the once-over, Mitch, and be convinced. No gold, says you! Why, the Sunstone Hills are lousy with it! We just found out—"

Cargile tensed as Rowdy strode toward the loose-tongued bandit, expecting him to yank a gun and plow lead into the tattler. Instead, the young road agent's fist pistoned, connecting with the train robber's chin as he wheeled to meet attack. Buckalew fell with a thud and didn't move.

Kirkwood picked up the ore sample which had dropped at his feet. He gazed at it a moment, then his slitted eyes lifted to the hard-faced Rowdy. "If you've discovered gold, what's the reason you want to keep it a secret from an old friend like me, Rowdy?"

"Old friend!" scoffed the young outlaw. "If you knew a way to get us rounded up and quit payin' toll, you'd 'a' done it long ago. Since that blabber-mouth let it out, Mitch, I'll admit we've found gold. But if you or your men tell a livin' soul outside the hills, I'll camp on your trail! Maybe, to be on the safe side, I oughta drill you now."

He slapped his right-hand holster, but Kirkwood tossed the rock on the ground, raised both arms. "Keep your gold! It ain't worth gettin' killed for. Me and my outfit won't say a word about it."

Rowdy looked down at Buckalew, who was slowly pushing up on an elbow. "Want to finish it in smoke?" gritted Dillon.

The train robber didn't answer and Rowdy turned away. But Cargile observed that the road agent leader drank no more, even though Kirkwood called to his teamsters to bring a third barrel of firewater while the outlaws were helping themselves from the second.

"Drink hearty," the big freighter invited, filling a tin himself, "to celebrate

your luck and prove there's no bad-feelin's!"

Lash said to Seth, "Kirkwood's aimin' to get those fellows dead drunk for some reason. I'm keepin' an eye on him."

"Greed for gold," returned Hazen sagely, "has turned more'n one honest man kill-crazy. He's got a tough bunch of skinners."

PRESENTLY Kirkwood retired in the direction of the wagons. Most of the outlaws were too drunk to notice his going. Lash nudged Seth and they slipped away from the crowd around the barrels. Although the wiping out of the long-riders would be a boon to the range country, Lash didn't exactly favor the murder of helpless men, bandits or no.

He spied the mule skinners, blacksnakes coiled over arms, crowding into the space between the first and second wagons. Sinking to hands and knees, the cowboy crawled toward the lead wagon. Seth, imitating him, came close at his heels. They crept under the wagon and lay low at the rear end, so close to some of the teamsters grouped around Kirkwood that they could have touched them by stretching forth their hands. Mitch's loud voice was reduced to a low pitch:

". . . Sure, there's more of them than us, but after they've lapped up the booze in them barrels the most of 'em won't know which end of a smoke-iron is the business end. We'll rub the last one out, stake claims on all the gold-bearin' ground and go record 'em at Burnt Ridge. By the time others get wise to the strike, it'll be too late for them to take anything but the leavin's."

Cargile felt someone tug his leg and caught the hoarse whisper, "Move over!" He did so, crowding against a big wheel, and Rowdy Dillon slid in between him and Hazen. Both his guns were bared.

"Plottin' to kill us all, are they?" the outlaw muttered. "I knew old Mitch had caught the gold fever when I saw him sneak off. You fellows got guns. Let's open up and spoil their game."

With the last word, tongues of flame spurted from Rowdy's Colts. Yells of pain answered the shots and two teamsters flopped to earth, bored in the legs. They tugged at six-shooters as they lay facing the rear of the wagon. Rowdy put a slug through the head of each before they could free weapons from leather. Mitch Kirkwood was roaring for his men to scatter and fight back. Bullets began whipping in from three sides, searching for the men crouched beneath the wagon bed.

Cargile and Hazen, whether they liked it or not, were involved in the strife, shooting for their lives. Lash, kneeling by a wheel, his gun shoved between two spokes, fired wherever he saw the flash of a Colt. The squatting figure of a mule skinner straightened, fell forward. Another slid on his face. One lead-tagged man, crazed with pain, leaped toward the wagon, his shots splintering a spoke. Lash spotted lead on his broad chest and he crashed against the wheel, falling slowly, with a gusty sigh.

Old Seth and Rowdy were making a furious din on the other side of the freighter. Whether or not Hazen was a good shot, Cargile was sure Dillon wasn't wasting much lead. He heard the outlaw curse, as if he had been hit. But Rowdy kept on triggering.

The great wheels of the freighter began to creak and turn as the barking of the Colts rose to crescendo. Either the mules had taken fright at the continuous shooting or some cagey teamster had mounted the saddle-wheeler to drive down trail, leaving the three men fighting odds unsheltered. Huddled together as the heavy wheels rumbled on, showering them with dust, Cargile, Hazen, and Dillon rapidly reloaded. The second wagon had been hauled off the rutted way so that the mules wouldn't be slugged by stray lead.

Crouched back to back, cowboy, sodbuster and outlaw faced a ring of flaming six-guns, a circle that was stretched thin, for they had previously accounted for about half of the gold-greedy skinners. With his first shot, Cargile flattened a hulking figure whose head and shoulders were skylined. He thought, from the man's size, it might be the boss freighter. But Mitch gave voice the next minute, urging his men to hurry and clean up. A bullet put a period to his speech, which ended in a strangled outcry, and Rowdy yelled:

"I got the old horny toad! Where's our friend that they're not chippin' in? Ain't all of 'em dead drunk!"

Only a few sodden figures were visible in the glow of the fires. Suddenly, as if

in answer to Rowdy's yell, six-shooters began playing a deadly tune behind the besieging mule skinners.

CHAPTER IV

THEIR wits whisky-dulled, slow to apprehend what was taking place, Rowdy's gang and the others had formed a second firing line and were pouring shots at every moving shadow. Some of the bullets dropped close to the huddled trio. They left off firing, stretched flat on the ground so as not to make targets of themselves for men who were hardly in condition to tell friend from foe.

But the sudden assault threw the remaining teamsters into a panic. They gave themselves away by springing up to run and were cut down in full flight. As the last skinner sprawled with lead in his back, Rowdy Dillon shouted for the outlaws to hold their fire. He and Cargile and Hazen advanced to meet the men who were still uncertain of the cause of the fight, and explanations followed.

"Mitch bit off more'n he could chaw," declared the young road agent. "But anyway it was an excuse to put him out of business, and now we've got the wagons and mules to tote our gold ore. But first we need minin' tools, dynamite and such. I've figured a way to get 'em. My cousin, Brig Dillon, runs a hardware store in Cactus Hill. I'll write him tonight to get the stuff ready."

Cargile and Hazen helped dig a trench in which to bury the boss freighter and his men. Lash knew there'd be trouble over the slaughter and the theft of the freight outfit. He hadn't wanted to shoot it out with the Kirkwood party, but Mitch had invited the massacre by his own covetousness. The wagons were driven to Dillon's 'dobe and unloaded, the owlhooters dividing the spoils on the spot.

At dawn the various gangs clattered away. Rowdy was to let them know when the mining implements arrived. He had written a letter to his cousin, the hardware merchant, dispatched one of his riders to mail it on the sly at the Burnt Ridge post office. Cactus Hill was only a day's ride from the Sunstone Hills, but Rowdy was too well-known to go near the town. Brig Dillon was more or less under surveillance in the event that his outlaw kinsman showed up there.

Rowdy hadn't shown that letter to anyone, for it contained instructions which would have caused his owlhoot neighbors to gang up on the road agent band. He was planning to despoil them of their share of the Sunstone gold. Not sure that Cargile and the Hazens would approve, he wasn't letting them in on the scheme.

But the young outlaw couldn't help boasting a little when he found Judith alone in the 'dobe after a late breakfast.

"I'll be richer than if I plundered stagecoaches the rest of my life, Judy," he said, with his widest smile. "And you can help me spend it."

"I?" said Judy soberly. "But I don't expect to be here long. Aren't you even a little bit sorry for being a—bandit, Rowdy?"

He drew nearer. "If it'll make you feel any better, yes, I'm sorry. I'm young yet. I can live down the past, and I will, if you'll marry me, Judy."

"But I don't love you, Rowdy." She backed slowly, not liking the look on his face.

With a long step he caught her in his arms. "You could learn, I reckon! You're a lovely girl, Judy, and I'm wild about you!" His sinewy arms tightened as she struggled.

A voice spoke from the doorway: "Let her go, Rowdy!"

The young bandit hurled Judy to one side, dropped his hands to gun-grips. He scowled as he saw Cargile's gun bent on him. Suddenly he unstrapped his crossed belts and tossed them behind him.

"If you want her, Cargile," he gritted, "you'll have to prove you're a better man than me. Come on!"

LASH needed no second invitation. Throwing aside his .45, he waded into Dillon, hard fists flailing. He drew first blood. It trickled from the outlaw's smashed lips as he gave ground, shaking his head, then lunged and landed on the cowboy's jaw. Seeing the half-dazed look on Cargile's face, Dillon tried to follow up with a knockout punch. But Lash, covering up, retreated. He banged into the stove, rebounded with a suddenness that took Rowdy by surprise. He jolted the outlaw with right and left swings. Rowdy clinched, and they stumbled across the floor, upsetting and smashing a chair.

Crashing against the table, they fell apart. Rowdy whipped a straight-arm jab for Lash's face. The cowboy rolled his

head and the punishing fist slid past his ear. He lashed back at the bloody face of Dillon, felt the shock of bunched knuckles meeting a hard chin. Rowdy was lifted clear of the floor, crumpled with eyes closed and lay motionless.

Conscious of more than one spectator, Cargile shot his gaze to doorway and windows, where Hazen and the road agents were peering in. He was a good distance from his gun. He just stood and returned their stares, slanting his eyes down as Dillon moved. The outlaw slowly raised his head, reached up to the table edge to draw himself erect. There was a feral look on his face. Then his teeth showed in a gory grin.

"You're a scrapper," he acknowledged. "But I don't say this settles it about the girl."

He staggered over and harnessed on his Colts. Lash did the same, watching the outlaw. But Rowdy made no move to draw. No man had ever bested him before and he was in a killing mood. But he had use for Lash.

Cargile learned of it a day or two later, as he stood talking to Seth Hazen by the corral. Rowdy came striding around the 'dobe, a set look on his thin features. He halted, thumbs hooked in gunbelts.

"Cousin Brig's got my letter by this time," said Rowdy, "and you two are elected to take one of the wagons after the minin' kits. Wouldn't be safe for any of us owlhooters, but you ain't known at Cactus Hill."

"Rowdy," replied Cargile, "I'm not havin' a hand in anything you do, not even for a share of the gold. I don't know how Seth feels—"

"I want the gold, all right," the sodbuster spoke up, "but I don't aim to get in any worse with the law than I am. Send somebody else."

Rowdy's smile was hard. "I figured you'd turn me down. But you'll change your minds, I reckon, if Judy's life depends on your goin' and comin' quick as you can." As they gazed at him, startled, he half turned and pointed to the rear window. In the aperture were framed a grinning road agent and Judy, with a rope about her arms. "Made her a prisoner without any fuss," said Rowdy.

"You wouldn't hurt Judy!" exclaimed Cargile.

"Don't be too sure," retorted the outlaw angrily. "It's you she likes, Lash."

For an instant, Lash was tempted to go for his gun. But killing Rowdy might not help the girl. He turned grimly to Seth. "Let's harness the mules. Takes two to drive a freighter, one man to handle the brakes."

Without sighting any of their old enemies from Burnt Ridge, the pair rolled into Cactus Hill, a mining town, the next afternoon. Brig Dillon was older than Rowdy, heavy-set, and his small, piggish eyes glinted with avarice when Lash told him who had sent them. There was a pile of heavy packing cases, marked *Mining Tools*, in the store, and Brig was eager to load at once. He was returning with the wagoners, said he could arrange with the Cactus Hill Mining Company to mill the outlaws' ore and no questions asked.

ASTRIDE the saddle-wheeler, Lash drove carefully to avoid bumps in the road, for some of the boxes put aboard contained dynamite. When night overtook them on the southward trail, they went into camp. The next day, with but a dozen miles between them and the Sunstone Hills, Lash descried horsemen swinging out of a ravine eastward. Perhaps it was a party from Burnt Ridge and he had no wish to be delayed with Judy held prisoner in the bandit stronghold. But he couldn't race the mules with that cargo of dynamite. Hauling on the jerkline, he turned to face Hazen and Brig Dillon, riding on top.

"Swing down and fork this mule, Brig! Maybe those riders will sheer off, but, to play safe, I'll crawl under the tarp with Hazen."

The riders didn't sheer off. After changing places with Cargile, Brig drove steadily until the horsemen hailed him and came alongside. Brig was shocked to see his cousin Rowdy, with hands tied, in their midst. It was a sheriff's posse, led by the beefy Pilger. With a glance at Kirkwood's name in peeling paint on the wagon's sideboards, Sheriff Pilger shifted probing eyes to the substitute mule skinner.

"You're Brig Dillon, from Cactus Hill, ain'tcha? Since when did you quit storekeepin' and start drivin' freight for Mitch?"

"It's a special load he asked me to

take down the road when two of his teamsters walked out on him," Brig lied glibly.

"What kind of a load?" inquired the sheriff. "Why don't you say howdy to Rowdy and stop actin' like you didn't know him. Caught him coyotin' around, not far from this road." Pilger slipped from the saddle. "I'll just have a look at what's in the wagon, Dillon."

Stretched beneath the tarpaulin, Cargile and Hazen had realized they were in a jackpot the instant they heard Sheriff Pilger's voice. Should they fight or not? The lawman's boots scraped on a front wheel, the waterproof canvas was flung aside. He stared at the men revealed, jerked his gun.

"Well, look who's here! Coupla Rowdy's playmates I've been mighty anxious to meet up with again. Do you give up?"

Lash and Seth rose, with arms cuddling their ears. The cowboy said, "Seein' that we could've shot you and didn't, that ought to prove—"

"Exactly nothin'!" snorted Pilger. "Climb out of there!" He reached for their hardware as they went over the sideboards. "Where's these boxes of minin' tools goin'? Been a strike somewhere?"

"Find out!" snapped Seth Hazen.

Lash didn't reply. He felt it would do no good to talk. Among the possemen he recognized Pilger's deputies, Curt Trask, the express agent, and several Burnt Ridge citizens. But one rider, rawboned and flint-eyed, with close-cropped mustache, was new to him. The wagon's contents evoked a lively discussion. Brig Dillon stoutly maintained he knew of no gold strike in the district.

Nobody noticed Trask when he edged around to Rowdy Dillon, more or less forgotten in the excitement. The outlaw looked doubtful as Trask leaned toward him, pocket knife in hand. Rowdy stifled a surprised oath as the blade severed the rope on his wrists.

Cargile, Hazen and Brig Dillon, standing mute under the bombardment of questions, aroused the sheriff's ire. "There's just one way to make 'em talk, boys! Bare their backs and lay on the quirt!"

At that moment a gun banged and the possemen whirled. Rowdy Dillon was tearing down the road, while Curt Trask thumbed the hammer of his .45.

CHAPTER V

TRASK lowered his empty Colt, shouting, "While you're foolin' with the small fry, the prize lobo takes a sneak! Happenin' to think of him, I turned my head, and there he was, a hundred yards away."

"Git to saddles!" yelled the exasperated Pilger. "Somebody watch these three sidewinders while we're recapturin' Rowdy!"

"I'll watch 'em," offered the express agent, quickly reloading.

The other possemen scrambled into leather and quirted away. Rowdy had disappeared in the brush. Curt Trask faced the three disarmed men by the wagon, a feverish light in his eyes.

"By the time they get back, we want to be long gone," he said. "I don't believe they'll catch Rowdy; anyway, he'll lead 'em a chase. I turned him loose. Why? Because I suspect that gold strike is down in the Sunstones, where you outlaws hang out, and I'm ready to join up."

"Admittin' you robbed the company's strongboxes?" asked Cargile.

"I don't know how you guessed it," returned Trask, "but that rawboned hombre you may have noticed is Barney Brashear, a man-getter hired by the Longbow to investigate the holdups. I know he's onto me and I've been plannin' to cut stick. Now's a good time."

Seth Hazen shook his fist. "And you accused me, egged on Pilger—"

"Forget it, Seth. We're all in the same boat."

"Maybe not!" barked Cargile. "If we should hold you for this Brashear, we might clear ourselves."

"How'd you do it without a gun?" sneered Trask. "And Brashear's death on bandits. If you ain't grateful for the chance to escape, I can leave you both here for buzzard bait!"

"Don't be fools, you two," Brig said to Lash and the oldster.

"Let's go," said Cargile grimly, and stalked off to mount the saddle-wheeler. Seth and Brig swung up over the front wheel.

Just as Lash shoved foot in oxbow stirrup, a shot at the rear of the big freighter startled him. He ran back, ducked under the wagon, straightened on the other side. Curt Trask was hold-

ing a gun on the rawboned Brashear, who lay on his side near a hind wheel. Feeble movement told that he still lived. Cargile flung himself on the express agent as his Colt belched smoky flame. The cowboy wrested the gun away, prodded the raging Trask with it. He made Curt raise the wounded manhunter with his back against the wagon wheel.

Brashear muttered, "I'll live yet to corral you gold-stealin' lobos! Workin' with Rowdy's gang, were you, Trask? I had a notion you turned Rowdy loose. So I quit the posse, slipped back to see what you'd do about the rest."

"I'm no owlhooter, Brashear—" began Cargile.

The manhunter looked at him bleakly. "You keep funny company, then."

"What'd I tell you, Cargile?" snarled Trask. "Let me finish him!"

Lash shook his head. "Help me lift him into the wagon, Trask. Here's your gun. I'll take Brashear's artillery myself."

Once more Lash took up the jerkline and the big wagon rumbled on. Trask, mounted on his own horse, led Brashear's saddler. They saw nothing of Rowdy or the posse, covering the last miles to the Sunstone Hills by sundown. But the first person they met as the freighter stopped near the big 'dobe was the young outlaw, jaunty as ever.

Rowdy had led the posse far from the wagon road, doubled on his trail and hit for home. He had been watching for the freighter when captured. Elated that the wagon had got through, he welcomed Trask as a brother owlhooter, slapped Cousin Brig on the back, but was cool toward Cargile and old Seth. When the wounded Brashear was lifted from the wagon, the old savage look came back to Rowdy's thin face.

"I'd like to kill you, Barney, but you might be useful as a hostage."

LASH and Seth held brief reunion with Judy, who was immediately released. But the three of them knew they were in as much danger as ever.

Going out to unhitch the mules as darkness fell, Cargile caught sight of Rowdy and Brig with heads together at the far side of the wagon. They were not aware of his presence, and he overheard Rowdy ask, "How many rifles did you bring?"

"Thirty, all I had in stock," replied Brig. "You didn't say in your letter how many you needed."

"It's more'n enough to kill off every owlhooter in the hills but my gang," chuckled Rowdy. "Countin' you and Trask, who I didn't expect to be here, there's fourteen of us. Can't trust Cargile and Hazen to take a hand, like I wrote you."

"Get some of the boys to unload," said Brig. "The cases with the .30-30's are marked with an *R* on the lids, the shovels with an *S*, the pickaxes with a *P*. It'll save trouble unpackin' everything."

Lash stood quietly by the dusty mules until Rowdy and his cousin had gone into the 'dobe, then commenced to unharness, his mind racing. He wasn't so surprised at Rowdy's treachery, though he hadn't suspected it. Obviously, young Dillon intended disposing of his outlaw neighbors with Winchesters, against which Colt-armed men would stand little show, and jumping all the claims. But what would happen if half those saddle guns fell into the hands of the marked men? A fight on equal terms in which the gangs might destroy each other. Lash thought it could be worked if the mining tools weren't unpacked before being sold to the other outfits.

Seth came out to help with the mules, and they held low-voiced colloquy. The road agents began to carry the boxes into the 'dobe, all but the few containing dynamite. Cargile and Hazen drove the mules out to graze, returning to find the 'dobe empty except for Judy and the bound Brashear. One case of shovels had been opened and the gang had gone to a near-by hill to cache the dynamite. Apparently Rowdy wasn't letting the other owlhooters have any of the explosive, which might be used to defeat his plan.

"Now's our chance, Seth!" exclaimed Cargile, grabbing the hatchet from the opened packing box and running his eye over the rest. "No cases here marked with an *R*."

"They put three of them in the back room," informed Judy.

Two cases of rifles were lugged into the front room, the lids carefully removed. Lash took out three Winchesters and boxes of shells. The lids from two boxes of pickaxes were nailed on the rifle cases, and the latter placed with the mining tools. Seth carried the pick-

axes, now bearing the lids from the Winchester cases, into the back room, while Lash swiftly loosened a floor board, stowing the three .30-30's and ammunition beneath.

"Mind tellin' what you're doin'?" Barney Brashear voiced the curiosity which consumed both him and Judy. "Where'd those rifles come from?"

Lash, nailing down the floor board, explained. "If this trick don't backfire, it may spell the finish of outlawry in these hills, and change your opinion that we're bandits, Brashear."

"I'm beginnin' to think you're not. You kept Trask from killin' me. What about that Kirkwood freight wagon? I saw a lot more of 'em in the yard. Is Mitch connected with this business?"

Cargile told about the finish fight, not omitting the part he and Hazen had been forced to play. Rowdy, Brig, Trask and the gang trailed back to the 'dobe. One of the road agents saddled up to make the rounds of the other owlhooters and inform them the mining tools had come.

Lash, Seth and Judy were on tenterhooks next day as the gang began arriving to purchase tools. It afforded them some relief when the cases were sold unopened. The tools were more easily carried that way. Unknowingly, Buckalew's train robbers bought two cases of rifles instead of shovels and pickaxes. When they asked about the dynamite, Brig, who conducted the sale, said he'd have to get it for them later at Cactus Hill. They seemed disappointed as they left to mount horses.

CARGILE had assisted Brig, to be sure who got the rifles. He quit the 'dobe with the owlhooters and tipped off Buckalew as the train robber was swinging to saddle. Apprized of the claim-jumping scheme, Jug began to curse.

"Don't let on now," warned Lash. "I switched the lids on the boxes and you've rifles enough to arm seventeen men. Better get the rustlers and others in on it. Rowdy's men will have only ten Winchesters."

"They'll kill you for it, if they suspect," mumbled Jug. "But thanks, Cargile. We'll take care of the sidewinders when they come."

The horsemen got into motion, and Lash sauntered back to the 'dobe. Rowdy and Brig, watching the last gang jog across the level, went in ahead of Lash. Rowdy seemed restless. He said they might as well eat and ride, no use waiting. But he didn't say where they were riding until the meal, hastily prepared by Judy and one of the outlaws, was over.

"Bring those rifles in here," Rowdy ordered, pushing back his chair, his hard eyes going to Cargile and Hazen. "I don't expect you'll want to go with us, though we're only exterminatin' the outlaws."

"Sudden about-face, ain't it?" asked Lash. "Aimin' to run for the sheriff's office after you clean up?"

"I'd make as good a sheriff as Pilger, anyway." Rowdy seized the hatchet and tackled one of the boxes brought from the back room. As he pried off the lid and the pickaxes were revealed, he snapped at Brig, "You must've marked this box wrong!"

"Didn't mark nothin' wrong!" his cousin barked back.

Confusion reigned when the loss of two cases of Winchesters was finally discovered and Rowdy realized they had got into the hands of the men he had marked for killing. Brig protested vigorously it wasn't his mistake, somebody had tampered with the boxes. Rowdy yanked a gun on Cargile and Hazen, his face blazing.

"Maybe you two are responsible! You could've done it while we were cachin' the dynamite! But I don't see how you knew about the rifles."

"If you're sure of it—well, shoot and get it over with!" Lash's calmness, facing that gun, made Rowdy doubt.

"If I was sure, I would! Can't take time to get at the truth now. We'll have to jump those fellows before they wise up to the meanin' of the Winchesters and get set for us. Tie up Lash and Seth, boys."

Cursing road agents swarmed over cowboy and sodbuster, snatched their guns, bound them. Cargile and Hazen didn't resist. Judy had been sharpening a butcher knife by the stove, minded to use it if worse came to worst. She knew that Rowdy would tie her, to prevent her releasing the others, unless—Screwing up her courage, the quick-witted girl let the knife slip. She cried out and staggered back to the wall, to slide down in

a heap. Rowdy Dillon darted to her side. "She's 'most cut off her thumb!" he exclaimed, lifting the limp form. "Don't seem like it would make her faint, but you can't tell about women."

He carried Judy to the cot in the back room and tried to revive her. Unsuccessful in this, he quickly knotted a handkerchief about the bleeding hand. Hesitating whether to tie her or not, he suddenly turned and tramped from the room. Things were happening fast for the outlaw. He couldn't delay if he hoped to take his owlhoot neighbors by surprise.

AS HORSES pounded away from the 'dobe, Judy stepped into the front room. "I'm not hurt as bad as you think," she answered the looks of her father and Cargile, holding up the bandaged hand. "I had to do something, hoping Rowdy wouldn't tie me up."

In a few moments she had released both men. Lash pried up the floor board, got out the Winchesters and cartridges. Meantime, Hazen cut the ropes on lustily. Cargile turned a glowing face.

"Sure whittled each other down if that's all there is left of 'em!"

Rowdy, Brig and Trask leaped from saddles in front of the 'dobe. Flinging themselves at the door, they cursed frenziedly as it resisted their efforts to open it.

"Judy turned the others loose!" snarled Rowdy. He hammered with his rifle butt. "Let us in, Cargile, and we'll make it right with you! The other gangs cut us to pieces. We chopped down all but what you see trailin' us. Quick, Lash, before they get here!"

Cargile spoke from the window, "Brashear would just as leave take you prisoners. Stand out where I can see you, all three, and shuck your hardware!"

They backed away from the door, hurled down their rifles, emptied holsters of six-guns. Lash nodded for Seth to unbar the door, covering it as Rowdy, smoke-grimed and powdered with dust, clanked into the room, his cousin and Trask close behind.

"If you'd let us keep the shootin'-irons," complained Rowdy, "we could help you stand off the bunch comin' up. Winchesters, eh? Some of Brig's you stole when you switched those box lids!"

Brashear, who was in condition to fight. A tense period of waiting followed. As time went on, rifle fire reverberated off in the hills. The three men and the girl wondered who was winning the fight.

About two hours after the departure of Rowdy's gang, the beat of hurrying hoofs sounded on the trail. From a window, Lash and his friends saw three men galloping ahead of ten or a dozen other wild riders. Winchesters were cracking

"Face the wall till we tie you!" ordered Lash.

All three turned, but Rowdy suddenly whirled back to face Lash, fisting a gun. It had been stuck in his waistband, his buttoned vest concealing the cedar stock. He almost took Lash off guard. As lead grazed his jaw, Cargile pressed trigger of the Winchester held at hip level. Dusted both sides, at that short and deadly range, Rowdy was carried off his

feet by the impact. He had no time for a second shot. Sprawled on the floor with blood welling from his chest, his spine shattered, he tried to turn his head for a last glimpse of Judy, muttering, "If I hadn't fallen for that girl . . ."

"Ain't any hideout guns on us!" Brig said hastily.

"Search and tie 'em, Seth!" snapped Cargile, flipping the lever of the Winchester.

The oldster had just finished when the pursuing bandits drew up outside. Lash turned to the window. They were quitting saddles, and catching sight of Jug Buckalew, the puncher rapped out:

"Rowdy's dead and we captured the other two. We're not lookin' for another scrap, though we've got Winchesters. How about givin' us safe passage from the hills in return for warnin' you and puttin' rifles in your hands?"

THE train robber nodded. "We do owe you somethin' for that, Lash. You and the Hazens can go, but leave Brig and Trask for us to settle with. And Brashear. He'd only hunt us down later if he got away."

"All or none, Buckalew," returned Cargile. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned. Brashear was crouching beside him.

"I'm ready to take my chances alone with the prisoners," said the manhunter. "That's what I'm paid for. You have no right to risk Miss Hazen's life. While the outlaws are in the mood to let you go, take advantage of it."

Seth and his daughter instantly protested, and Lash smiled faintly. "You see, Brashear, they agree with me. It's all or none." He turned back to the window and called, "We're ready for you, Buckalew!"

Rifle bullets slammed against the 'dobe wall and saddle guns answered from the windows. Three outlaws fell loosely on the sun-baked earth; one or two others had to crawl when the rest retreated. They opened up again at two hundred yards, settled in patches of brush. It looked like the beginning of a long-drawn-out battle, for Lash and his friends found them less easy to target in the brush coverts. Presently it struck the cowboy that there were only four Winchesters talking in the sage. Where were the rest of the bandits? They hadn't been killed, he was sure of that.

The next minute he knew. Desperate faces upreared at the window where he crouched, six-shooters slanted to drill him. Three quick shots emptied his rifle and drove the frenzied faces down from sight. As the last outlaw's hand slipped from the sill, the roar of guns at the window manned by Hazen and Brashear thinned to silence. Cargile spoke:

"They almost had us that time. While four of 'em kept firin' from the brush, the rest snaked up close to the wall."

"The four that's left see it's no use to try again," said Brashear.

Cargile looked out. Four discouraged bandits were swinging to saddles. They headed south at a gallop. Lash unbolted the door, peered at the men lying by the front wall. Not one showed sign of life.

"It's safe to ride," he said, closing the door, "but I don't know what kind of a reception Seth and me will get in Burnt Ridge."

"I'll stand by you both if there's trouble," declared Brashear. "But I doubt it. Folks will be too crazy stampedin' to these hills when they know gold's been found. You and Hazen deserve to be in on it. Put your monuments on a couple of the best claims and register them at Burnt Ridge."

"That's me!" yelled Seth, breaking for the door. "I've been waitin' for this all my life! C'mon, Lash!"

Lash looked at Judy, and she came to his side. They followed the old man out of the 'dobe, content to let him get far ahead. Brashear, smiling at their backs, turned to the prisoners.

"My luck won't be complete," said Lash, "unless you're around to share it, Judy."

"I'm not going anywhere, Lash, except to Burnt Ridge and back."

"We might stop at the preacher's while in town," he suggested, "if there is one —and you're willin'?"

"There is—" Judy's eyes shone with the lovelight Lash had hoped to see— "and I'm willing."

Badman's Last Laugh

By Le Roy Boyd

Horse Creek hombres cottoned to a good joke. And they couldn't think of anything funnier than to pin a law badge on the town bum —until the West's worst badman paid a call to make a holster haul.

THE gurgling sounds of the old drunk coming out of his jag grated worse on one's nerves than the crying spell he'd had last night shortly after he'd been thrown in for raising Cain at the Blue Rooster saloon and entertainment parlor. He was badly in need of a jolt.

A big slug of whisky would put him back on his feet, and then again the remnants of his pride might be stirred once more by the stinging lash of a fellowman's scorn.

Sheriff Vic Stanley decided finally to use the latter remedy and save a quarter. He walked over to peer through the bars at old Biffy Emerson slumped on the cell bunk. "For Pete's sake—stop that sniffling!"

A young man, Vic was, and life,

though hard here in Horse Creek as in any other Colorado cowtown, had not dealt unkindly with him. He seemed unaware of the vitality that filled every corner of his long lanky body, and since confidence in himself was still a part of his character he had little sympathy for failure in another.

He saw in Biffy's bleary eyes when the old man lifted his head the depths of his misery. There was more in it than had come from a bottle. "What's the matter with you?" he growled. "You really sick?"

Biffy's body sagged as if the burden of his futility had become too heavy for him. "Worse than that."

"Want me to get Doc Sawyer?"

"He can't do nothing." Biffy clasped and unclasped his hands several times, and the lines were drawn deeper on his seamed face. "Got word yesterday my daughter's coming to see me—says maybe she'll stay a week. And she's got to find her dad is just an old booze hound."

"Didn't know you had a daughter."

"Been back in the East—staying with an aunt ever since her mother died. And now Anne's finished school she's going out to Santa Fe to teach in a mission. But she's coming this way first for a visit with me." Biffy stood up suddenly; he lurched forward and grasped the bars. "Trouble is, Vic—been telling her lies all these years. Said I was a famous sheriff out West here."

The thought of Biffy wearing a lawman's badge put a cynical smile on Vic's lips.

Biffy had come to this country long ago. Since, according to the old code, no one had bothered to ask about his past he had never said anything about it. Somewhere along the way he'd lost his ambition, and his reputation had become as shoddy as the rag-tag clothes he wore. He was just one more derelict grasping at elusive dreams to compensate for his feeling of insignificance.

BIFFY sensed the thoughts in Vic's mind. He drew himself up and mumbled: "Could have been, maybe, if the breaks hadn't gone against me. Look! How's this—if I should meet up with somebody like—like Dod Hooker!" He took a step backward, held himself erect for a moment, and his hand whipped down in the sinuous motion of a quick draw.

"Not bad," Vic said with the tone of an adult humoring a child.

"Now you're laughing at me." Tears spilled over Biffy's cheeks. "Don't believe me—do you, Vic? Here, read this." He worked a letter from a pocket and handed it to Vic. "She sent a picture, too, so's I'll be sure to know her."

Vic drew the sheet from the envelope. Folded within the paper was a small photograph. He stared at the smooth fine features of the young woman it portrayed and found in them a similarity to those of Biffy. But there was also a difference. In her eyes was a wondering interest in a world to be explored, and within the shades of gray was the image of one who had not yet met the harsh realities of life.

"I'd have written her not to come," Biffy added. "But says there by the time I got the letter she'd be on her way. Can't stop her now."

Vic slipped the print in his shirt pocket. He rammed the letter back into the envelope and thrust it at Biffy. "Don't blame you none for being ashamed," he snapped. "If I was in the shape you are I wouldn't want her to see me, neither."

He turned and strode to the door. Behind him he heard the old man sob: "Poor Biffy—" Vic lunged outside before he could hear any more and headed for Doc Sawyer's office.

The old doctor was having a cup of coffee at the desk in his consultation room. When Vic entered he got up and put on a frayed Prince Albert that was as shabby as the hopes he'd had once of being a great physician. The coat hid his collarless dirty shirt and added to the sad funereal aspect he wore with a professional air. He sat down again and asked Vic what he could do for him.

"Got Biffy in jail," Vic said. "Like for you to see if you can sober him up."

Doc Sawyer brought the tips of his fingers together. A muscle at the side of his big Roman nose twitched. "Be a waste of good medicine."

"Wish you'd do it, though. Old Biffy's in pretty bad shape."

Doc Sawyer took a moment to brush some dandruff from the lapel of his coat. "How come you're getting tenderhearted all of a sudden?"

"Want to get shed of him—he's driving

me crazy. Do what you can and turn the bill in to the county. If I only had me a jailkeeper. . . ."

"Got an idea there." Doc Sawyer grinned. "Why not give Biffy the job? There most of the time anyway."

"You and your ideas!" Vic left the old doc with his coffee and hurried out of the office.

BABE HARLEQUIN, as she was known in Horse Creek, was a singer and entertainer at the Blue Rooster. She lived in a small shack on the west edge of town where she could have some kind of a private life after her public appearances at the saloon.

She came to the door in response to Vic's rap, and seeing who it was she invited him in. "Almost caught me at breakfast," she said. "Have a chair."

Vic selected a rocker and dropped his hat to the floor. He got his tobacco and papers, and as he rolled the smoke he kept his gaze on the manipulation of his fingers.

Babe was wearing an old blue silk wrapper, and her hair which had a washed-out blond color was done in paper curlers. Her face without the rouge and powder had an old worn look, and this morning the creases caused by the artificial smile necessary for her kind of work were more prominent than usual.

She waited until he had lit his cigarette and broken the match. Then: "What's on your mind, Vic?"

She had sat down on a trunk, and his glance went across the room to her. "It's Biffy," he said. He told her the story, and when he had finished he added: "Way he went for his gun—that is, if he'd had one—he must have been practicing a lot."

"Probably. Or living over some old memory."

The suggestion escaped him, for his mind was on something else. He shifted on the rocker and flicked the ash from his smoke inside the top of his boot. "'Course, not my fault if the girl's got to find her old man the way he is."

"Is she pretty?"

"Biffy had a picture. Want to see it?"

She took the print and gave it a brief glance. After a moment she returned her gaze to him. "Why don't you give Biffy a chance, Vic? Go away a few days. You've been saying there's some work out at your ranch, and Hank and Pedro could use some help."

"What about my job here?"

"You could appoint a deputy!"

A slow pounding began on the left side of his chest; he was startled at her ability to read his mind. She had perceived the thought that had occurred to him and which had been so fantastic he had been reluctant to put it into words.

"Who?"

"Biffy!"

"I'm not crazy. What would Biffy do if anything happened?"

"You've got the town pretty quiet now. And I'll pass the word to the boys—they'll be glad to watch after him. It'll just be for the time the girl is here. When she leaves you can come back and take over again."

"A no-'count bum cadging drinks to keep drunk!"

Babe got up and raised the lid of the trunk. She dug in the contents and brought out some bills. "About a hundred dollars here," she said. "If it isn't enough there's more where that came from." A little quirk twisted at the corners of her mouth. "We're going to make a sheriff out of Biffy. Take him to the barbershop and tell Kap to give him the whole works. Mac Gordon will fix him up for new clothes. Then bring him to Ben Noble's. I'll meet you there."

Vic crumpled the bank notes in his hand. "You're throwing your money away."

"It's mine and I can do what I want to with it, can't I?"

THE dance-hall girl leaned back against the trunk; she pulled the old blue wrapper tighter about her body. "If I hadn't lost faith in *my* old man when I was a kid, maybe I wouldn't have to make my living entertaining in dance halls. Could go to church once in a while, and nice women would invite me to their parties—" She paused and rubbed a knuckle in her eyes. "Run along now—do what I say."

She took his arm and led him to the door, gave him a shove to get him started. He went out to the street, and as he turned toward town he wondered if Doc Sawyer's medicine had had time to clear the alcoholic fog from Biffy's brain.

In spite of Babe, he was dubious that anything could be done for the old man. Biffy was too far gone for that. Yet when Kap at the barbershop had given him a shave and a haircut and Mac Gordon had fitted him with a new suit he saw a change come over him. And when they made their way to Ben Noble's saddle and harness shop, Biffy's heels clumped on the sidewalk with the firm tread of an actor on the boards.

Ben was at the front of the shop talking with Babe. He was short and fat, and his bald head and good nature had kept him as chairman of the board of commissioners for ten straight years.

He hooked a thumb under a gallus and passed a scrutiny over Biffy. One eyebrow was lifted when he turned his attention to Vic. "Babe's been telling me about it," he said. "Going to have a deputy, huh?"

"Could use one. Like to get out to the ranch a few days."

"Sure—sure. Sheriff shouldn't try to do it all."

"Better swear him in, Ben," Babe said. And when that was done she told Biffy: "Sam has a gun for you."

Old Sam Medwick, the town's gunsmith, unfolded his tall, lean frame from behind his work bench at the rear of the shop. "Got just the right number for you," he said soberly.

When Biffy had gone back to the bench Babe clutched Vic's hand and gave it a warm pressure. "Knew you'd do it. You think you have to be hard and hew to the letter of the law—and maybe you do. But underneath all your hardness you've still got a heart."

Ben rubbed a paw over his bald head and cleared his throat. "Not making a mistake in Biffy," he rumbled affably. "He'll surprise you."

Vic leveled a sharp glance at Ben. He had un uneasy feeling, and the way Ben had said that increased his sense of misgiving.

Ben's face bore an innocent expression, though. He did not know that coming up from the south was Dod Hooker and Squint Underwood and Utah Kirby, three tough hombres.

They'd just been told down near San Antone that their absence was more welcome than their presence. Dod's ego had been badly hurt, and there was only one way it could be repaired.

HORSE CREEK loved a good joke. Biffy's being appointed an undersheriff was the best one yet. And when the story that his daughter was coming got around, the citizens entered heartily into the spirit of the affair.

Unaware of their conspiracy, the old man swaggered through the town wearing the badge Vic had turned over to him since no deputy's was on hand. The hollow deference accorded him was as satisfying to his hunger for approbation as the respect which had been his for a few months in Abilene in the days gone by. His shoulders took on a measure of firmness and his eyes began to grow brighter, but he kept the old memories locked in his mind.

So far as Vic could see, no one was going to cause any trouble. He decided to wait, however, until the girl came before going out to his ranch, and that afternoon when the stage pulled in from the north he was in the crowd gathered in front of the hotel.

Biffy handed her down from the Concord with a theatrical flourish. She was a little thing, and the bit of white lace at the collar of her black dress accentuated the marks of travel weariness on her features. She smiled pleasantly and raised a finger to touch the sheriff's star on Biffy's chest, and Vic made a mental note that the picture had failed to reveal her living personality.

Suddenly she cried, "Dad!" and threw her arms around Biffy and kissed him.

Biffy was embarrassed by the unsophisticated display of her emotion. He glanced quickly at the crowd to see if anyone was grinning at them and gently slipped out of her arms. He bent his knees and picked up her carpetbag. "We got a room all by yourself here at the hotel," he said, adding importantly, "and it's right next to mine."

He started to lead her inside. As they stepped up on the porch he halted and said: "Anne, like to have you meet Ben Noble. One of our county commissioners."

Ben was a gentleman. He tugged the hat from his bare pate. "Welcome to our town, Miss. Ever since your dad said you was coming we been looking for you."

A mumbling like the hum of bees passed through the throng, and others pressed close to meet her.

"This is Kap Jones—and Doc Sawyer."

Vic left before Biffy could introduce

him. He headed down the street. Babe fell in beside him and walked with him to the Blue Rooster.

"Better come in and have a drink, Vic," she said. "You look like you need one."

He darted a suspicious glance at her.

Nodding, he turned into the saloon, and she took him to a table near the piano. At a signal from her a sleepy *mozo* brought a bottle of brandy and glasses from the bar.

Babe waved him away and poured the glasses herself. She pushed one toward Vic. "Well, what do you think of her?"

He raised the drink to his lips, and the heat of the liquor ran into his face. He reached for the bottle and filled the glass again.

"Look, Babe," he grunted. "Tell the boys. If any of them start raising hell while I'm gone they'll answer to me. Understand?"

Her old, old smile puzzled him. It was unlike those she had for the boys when she sang her songs here.

"Everything's going to be all right," she told him. "And if something should come up we can't handle, we know where to find you."

AFTER Vic had finished his second drink, he shoved himself up off the chair. He was about to add something more, but found he had run out of words. Leaving her, he made his way to the jail.

First he went to the corral, saddled his horse, and led the animal around to the front. He had to go inside for his slicker, and when he stepped through the door he found Biffy. The old man had his heels on the desk and was smoking a cigar someone had given him.

"You?" Vic growled. "Thought you'd be at the hotel."

Biffy lowered his feet to the floor. He flicked the ash from the cigar with a crook of his little finger. "Anne was tired," he explained. "Told her she might rest awhile before supper."

Vic got the slicker from behind the door. He moved across the room to stand beside the desk and glare down at Biffy.

"I'm going away a few days," Vic said. "But I got something to say to you first. If I hear you've been on another bender while I'm gone, I—I'll break every bone in your body!"

Biffy stiffened his backbone, and resentment flushed his face. "That's no way to talk to your deputy, Vic."

"Deputy—your foot! Wasn't for your daughter you'd never have had the chance to call yourself one. It's her I'm thinking about."

The starch went out of Biffy, and moisture came into his eyes. His fingers fumbled at the sheriff's badge. "If you think—"

"Let that alone," Vic barked. "Wear it—long as she's here. And for once in your miserable life, see if you can *act* like a man!"

He swung on his heel and hurried out to his horse. . . .

Three nights later Sam Medwick rode into the camp Vic and his two men had made where they were working the cattle near the south line.

Sam stepped from the saddle and stretched the kinks out of his legs. "Like to never have found you," he grumbled.

Vic threw off his blanket and got to his feet, peered at Sam outlined against the moonlight. Pedro lit a cigarette, and Hank profanely growled something about fools having no more sense than to ride around at night.

"Vic," Sam said. "Ben sent me for you. Dod Hooker hit town short time after you left, and he's itching for a fight. Was getting so mean this afternoon we thought you'd better come back to town."

"Wasn't the boys going to look after things while I was away?"

"Ain't nobody going to tackle Dod—none of us would have a chance. Besides, he's brought a couple of hombres with him."

An ironic grin traveled across Vic's lips. "So it's up to me?"

"We know you can handle them," Sam said. "It's Biffy we're worried about. Strutting around like a turkey gobbler—no more sense than to take Dod Hooker on and get himself full of lead. We wouldnt want that to happen while Anne is here. After all, a joke can go too far."

A coldness swept through Vic's veins. His hand snaked out and grabbed Sam's shoulder. "What do you mean, man—joke?"

"Wait, Vic — wasn't my idea." Sam squirmed out of Vic's hold. He worked his jaw to get his chew of tobacco back in place.

"Everybody decided to play up to Biffy," Sam continued, "while the girl is

here, anyway. Make him think he really is somebody. Wanted to put something over on you, too. We like you, Vic—yet after all you've been mighty hard-boiled keeping us on the straight and narrow. And folks got to kick over the traces once in a while."

A GREAT surge of anger filled Vic. It shook him, and hot blood boiled to his head. They'd taken him for a ride!

It had been Babe Harlequin who'd suggested he put Biffy on the job, and the thought of her was like a dagger digging at his brain. He'd been sorry for her, shunned as she was by the women of the town, and had been friendly to her. And this was the way she repaid his kindness. No doubt right now she and her boys were laughing at him for a fool.

He had done it for the old man's daughter, though, so Anne wouldn't have to lose her illusions. He reached and touched the picture he still had in his pocket, and the feel of it had a sobering effect on him. He saw now the position he was in; if Biffy went down before Dod Hooker's guns he, Vic, would be responsible.

"You and your damn joke!" he snarled at Sam. "What time is it?"

"After midnight."

Vic turned to his two men. "Hank, you and Pedro go ahead with the cows here. I'm riding in to town."

Sam rubbed his right cheek and stared at Vic's back as the latter went for his horse.

The lawman's anger was a whip all the way back to Horse Creek, and when he and Sam reached town a little while before eight in the morning their mustangs were gaunted and done.

Vic caught sight of Ben Noble in front of his shop; Ben had been painting the front of his place, but he had paused and was staring down the street. Vic pulled up at the tie pole and stepped from the saddle.

"Vic!" Ben drew a sleeve through the perspiration on his fat face. "Sure glad you come."

"All right! And where's Biffy?"

Ben pointed with the paintbrush in his hand. Vic looked in the direction he indicated, and his glance took in the man standing in front of of the Blue Rooster. His presence there had caused an ominous quiet to settle down on the scene.

"Dod Hooker," Ben explained, "was bragging last night he'd have him a sheriff for breakfast, but I didn't know but what—"

He halted abruptly, and the ruddy color drained from his features. Biffy had emerged from the jail and was coming up the street. Dod saw him and moved across the road to get the advantage of the shade.

A heaviness like a hunk of cast iron formed in Vic's stomach. He should have gone straight to his office at the jail; he could have taken that badge from Biffy then and saved his life. Even yet—if he hurried!

He brushed past Ben and headed for Dod Hooker. He waved to Biffy to keep back. The old man paid no heed to him, though, and Vic broke into a run.

"Dod!" he called to attract the killer's attention. Dod swung part way around. Vic slowed his pace, and his hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

He heard Ben's warning yell a split second before the Colt roared on his right. The slug whipped close to his head and stopped him. He sensed the presence of another hombre on his left even before Sam Medwick's screech reached him.

DOD HOOKER might have been out to get himself a sheriff in order to salve his wounded ego. Like any other gunslinger, however, he had to have the odds in his favor, even against poor old Biffy. He'd planted Squint Underwood and Utah Jones at points where they could give him those odds, and Vic had walked into the trap.

Squint was in a narrow passageway between two buildings. Vic snapped a shot in his direction to keep him there, took a quick step backward and whirled to face Utah Jones. As he did so lead jerked at the shirt over his ribs.

The roar of gunfire filled the street and rocketed from the false-fronted stores and shops like all the furnaces of hell going full blast. Vic's first shot at Utah Jones went wild. So did his second one. It had to be his third that stopped the hombre.

Utah Jones took a dive into the dust of the road. Before he'd hit the ground Vic turned to tangle with Squint.

All he could see of the bozo was his head and a shoulder thrust beyond the corner of the building. And his gun! Flame stabbed from the weapon like the

red tongue of a venomous snake, and Vic hurled an answer to it.

His bullet plowed a slew of splinters from the corner post. Squint recoiled as one gashed at his cheek and doing so heaved himself partly from his cover. Vic's next slug caught him high on the left side and smashed his collarbone. The blow dropped Squint, and as he went down his gun slithered across the walk out of his reach.

Vic kicked it towards the center of the road as he stepped past Squint to take on Dod. He leveled his Colt, squeezed the trigger for a long shot.

In that second his heart stopped, and his veins seemed to fill with ice water. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber! He'd used all his loads!

Vic broke the gun; his shaking fingers clawed frantically for fresh cartridges in his belt. He kept his eyes on Biffy as the old man pulled to a halt before Dod Hooker.

"Got your message, Dod," Biffy said, his voice sharp and clear in the stillness that had wrapped around them. "You looking for trouble—or what?"

Dod Hooker no longer had the odds his sidekicks might have given him, but the owlhoot couldn't back out now. Anyway, he could beat this mossback. With a sneer on his lips his hand flashed downward.

Vic thought of the time Biffy had shown him how he'd pull a gun. Yet his mind needed a couple of moments to grasp what he saw just then.

With the cards on the table Biffy's draw had been as slick and sure as his demonstration at the jail the other morning.

The impact of a slug lifted Dod off his feet. As the life ran out of the hole in his chest a convulsive jerk of his finger on the trigger sent a bullet to plunk into the front of a store on the far side of the street. Dod went on backwards and felt in a crumpled heap on the sidewalk.

Biffy's right leg was giving way under him. He staggered, tried to catch his balance, and finally sagged to the ground.

Vic raced to help him, dropped down on his knees to see how badly he'd been hurt.

"Got one in the leg," Biffy muttered. His voice wavered and tears came into his eyes. "Guess the old man's not as good as he thought he was."

"Good enough," Vic growled. He stood up and glanced at the crowd gathering around them. "Take him to the hotel," he snapped. "And somebody get Doc Sawyer."

Of course, Vic told himself, he had to get Squint to the jail and the others to the undertaking parlors. At the back of his mind, though, he knew the reason he hadn't gone with Biffy was his reluctance to see Anne.

But he couldn't put it off forever, and after a while he made his way to the hotel. When he entered the lobby he saw Babe in the opening that led to the dining room, and he broke his stride and stared at her.

BABE was wearing a white waitress dress, and this morning there was no rouge or powder on her cheeks. A few marks of the hard life she had lived were still in evidence on her features, but behind the sparkle in her eyes was a promise that in time they would be erased.

"Babe?" Vic gulped. "What're you doing here?"

Her smile was lacking in its usual affectation. Nor was it smug. "Working," she said. "I've quit the job at the Blue Rooster."

Vic was about to remark on the change. Before he could do so she spoke again.

"Wasn't Biffy grand? Reminded me of the time he was at Abilene."

"Abilene? You knew him before he came here? Then—when you gave me that money—"

"He was marshal there for three months. Too honest for some, so they fired him. Broke his spirit and that's when he took to drink."

"Why the Sam Hill didn't you tell me? I'd have done something for him."

She shook her head, and a little quirk tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Person has to work out his own destiny. All the help in the world won't do any good if he doesn't want it. But you'd better hurry on upstairs, Vic."

He left her and climbed the stairs to Biffy's room. Anne was by the window when he came in. He avoided her eyes and moved to the foot of the bed to send a questioning look at Doc Sawyer. The old medico had finished with Biffy. He'd put on his coat and sat down on the chair by the bed for a moment more.

"How is he?" Vic asked.

"All right—he's a tough one. And he's

got a good nurse." Doc gave Anne a warm smile. "She tells me she's giving up that Santa Fe job—to stay here with her pa."

The kindliness in Doc Sawyer's voice puzzled Vic. So, too, did the change that had taken place in the old physician. Doc's hair had been cut and his beard trimmed. His shirt was clean. He'd got a new Prince Albert, and the collar was free of dandruff.

And then, suddenly, he knew it was part of all the rest—the transformation in old Doc Sawyer, Babe Harlequin taking a respectable job as a waitress, Ben Noble painting his shop. There had also been other signs down there on the street, now that he recalled them, of the change that had come over the town. His mind sought for some explanation, but it eluded him at the moment.

He was jerked out of his thoughts by Biffy. "Don't believe you've met my daughter. Anne, this is Vic Stanley I was telling you about."

She gave him a little nod. When she spoke, it was like the tone of old silver bells. Slowly, the sound merged into the answer he'd been seeking, and the idea was a new one to him. Never before had he had the experience of finding that sometimes the influence of a good character packs more wallop than a six-gun.

"You'll be needing the star," Biffy said. "It's over there on my coat."

Vic could maintain the fiction of Biffy being a great man as well as anybody else. "Keep it," he grinned. "I'll sort of look after things until you're up and around again."

"No, *sheriff*," Anne said quietly. "It rightly belongs to you!"

A flash of warmth shot through Vic. He frowned and sent a glance at her.

"Dad's told me everything," she explained. "And I'd like for all you good people to know how much we appreciate what you've done—especially you for giving him another chance."

"Why—why, we didn't—"

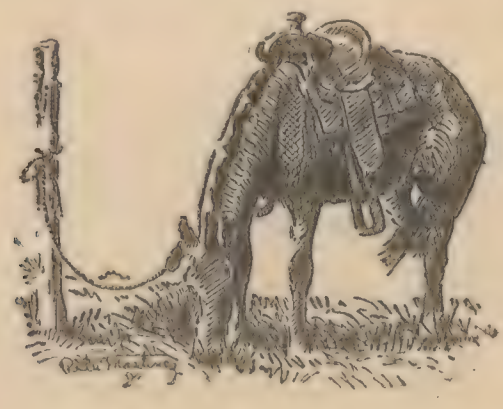
"Man gets too big for his britches he always gets into trouble," Biffy said. "But Doc says you been wanting a jail-keeper. Now that you don't need a deputy no longer—if I could have that job—"

"But I do need a deputy—somebody in town here when I have to be gone. If you'll take it, you're on the payroll right now."

Vic saw Anne blink, and he was afraid the tears would come. "Have to go take care of some things," he told her quickly. "But I'll be back to see how Biffy's getting along."

He left, and Doc Sawyer watched Anne for a little bit. He lifted an eyebrow and squinted at the door through which Vic had gone. So the young buckaroo was coming to see—Biffy!

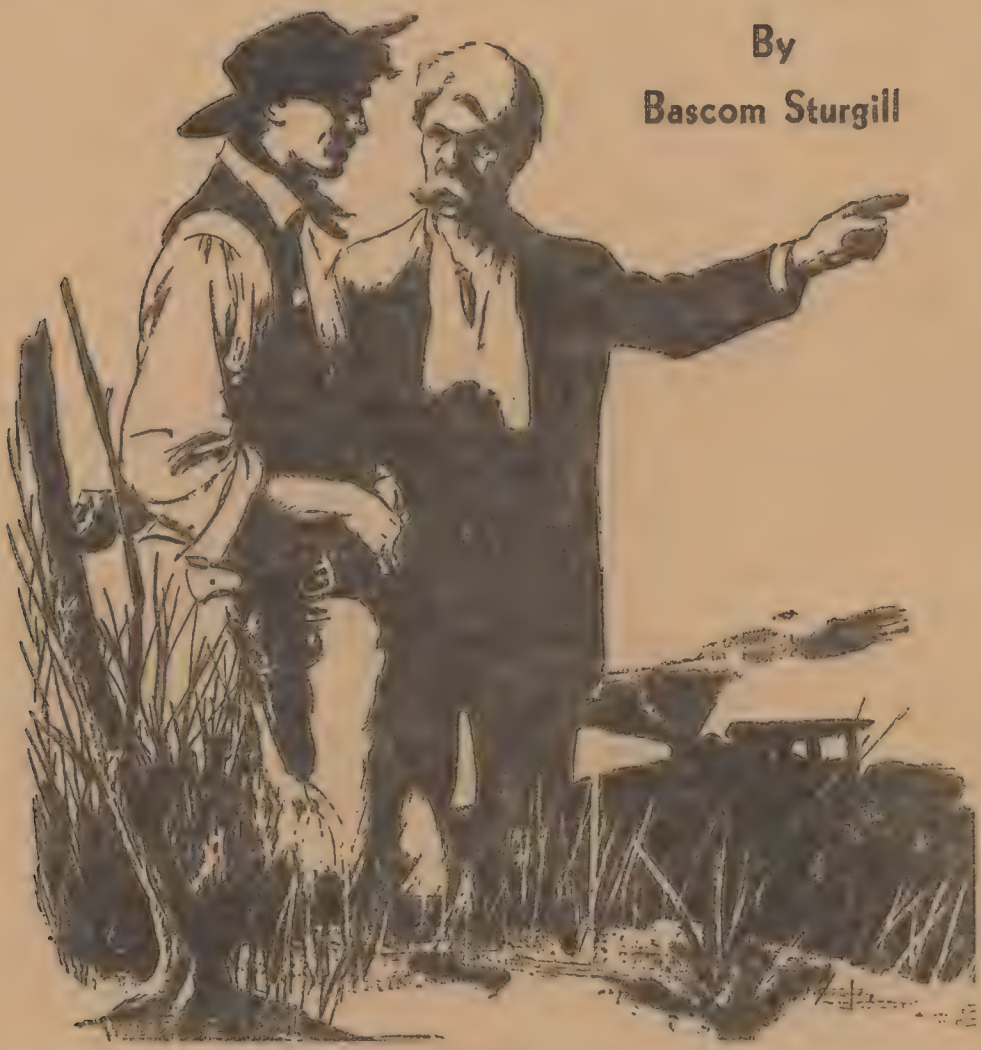
A muscle at the side of Doc's Roman nose twitched. He wondered if he'd betray his professional ethics if he kept the old man in bed a couple weeks longer than necessary.



Railhead in Hades

By

Bascom Sturgill



Instead of talking over that coal mine deal, those hard-case hombres suddenly accused Johnny Fallon of murdering his pard. And young Johnny discovered he had swapped his coal contract for a powdersmoke pact.

THE tide of empire was rolling west and north across the flat face of Texas. Into the sunset from Dallas lay the new rails of the Texas and Pacific Railroad. Up from Galveston and Houston came the International and Great Northern. And innumerable short lines were tightening steel fingers on the vast, unfenced plains that stretched away into the gray distances.

Young Johnny Fallon was one of the men who stood ankle deep in the dust and watched the first freight roll into Escalante City, smoke belching from her huge, bell-shaped stack, steam pulsing

backward from leaky pistons. The arrival of Engine 369 put Escalante City on the map. It became, for the time at least, a railhead of importance, because it was the western terminus of the Texas and Pecos Railroad.

As the little engine ground to a stop, Johnny surged forward with the movement of the crowd. Along the way the freight had picked up several passengers, and Johnny could see them now, perched like sparrows atop the cars, hats in hand, hair ruffled by the wind.

Some of them were from his and little Zach Avery's Sunfire Mine, others from the Hot Spot, owned by Luke Middleton. But Johnny had eyes only for his little pardner, who was supposed to be stowed away among the men.

Johnny and Zach had had some harsh words this morning before Johnny left the mine, but Johnny was ready to forget the incident now. It hadn't amounted to much anyway, and besides, this was a great day for the pardners. With the railroad pushing its sooty nose into and slightly beyond the limits of Escalante City, a new market had been opened for the coal which they had been digging from the dark maw of Lost Creek Mountain, thirty miles to the east.

But the important development of the day was the awarding of the fuel contract by the Texas and Pecos Railroad. Bids would be taken today, to be turned in day after tomorrow, and there were only two bidders, Luke Middleton of the Hot Spot and the Sunfire Mine. And there was a clause in the contract concerning quality and delivery that almost assured Johnny and Zach the contract. It would mean a steady and profitable source of income.

MEN were piling off the cars now, dressed in their Saturday best, and Johnny spoke to a few of them. Thus it was that he didn't know just when he first realized that something was wrong. Perhaps he read it in the grim, unsmiling faces turned to meet him, perhaps it was intuition. But the knowledge was suddenly with him, like a mailed fist crushing his heart.

"Hey, Al," Johnny called to one of his own miners, "have you seen Zach?"

The man called Al laid a slow glance on Johnny, then without answering, climbed deliberately down from the car and strode over to where Johnny stood.

"Sure, Johnny," he answered softly, "sure I've seen Zach. He's up in the cab with Pop Sanders and Mort Duke—dead."

Johnny didn't speak. He couldn't. He could only stand and stare at Al, feeling the tightness about his heart and the dizziness welling almost to bursting in his head. That passed after a bit and, without another word to Al, he turned and marched back toward the cab.

But the cab was empty. Someone told him that old Pop and young Mort, his fireman, had taken Zach's body across the tracks to Williston's Undertaking Parlor. And as Johnny started around the nose of the little engine he observed that part of the crowd was following him. Perhaps he should have guessed then that something else was wrong, but he didn't. Without looking at the men, he figured that they, like himself, were saddened by Zach's death, and that this was a silent gesture of respect.

At the door of Williston's establishment, however, he came face to face with big Lee Sevensky, one of his own men. Johnny nodded and started to pass into the building. But Sevensky, it seemed, had other ideas. He stepped directly in front of Johnny, blocking his passage.

"They don't need you in there, Fallon," he said briefly.

Johnny stopped, somewhat confused. "What do you mean, Sevensky?" he demanded.

"Only that a lot of folks don't cotton to your brass."

Johnny felt the skin draw tight along his scalp. "You ain't insinuatin' that I killed Zach, are you, Sevensky?" he drawled.

The big miner didn't budge. "Ain't nobody accused you yet, have they, Fallon?" he answered silkily, threat only half veiled in his tone. "And remember, them words are your own."

Johnny lunged then, drove his hard-balled fist straight into Sevensky's jutting jaw, drove him back from the door and into the big reception room.

The shock of the blow running back along Johnny's arm was a relief to his pent-up emotions, but it also sobered him. He realized now that he should never have struck Sevensky at all. He had let Sevensky trick him into what practically amounted to an admission of guilt, and his own quick defense, before he had

been actually accused, would only serve to increase suspicion of him.

This fact was not long in making itself manifest. A low, guttural sound lifted from the mob at his back, and as Johnny turned, he saw the forward movement begin. It was only then that he observed for the first time that the crowd was composed mostly of Middleton's Hot Spot miners, with only a few of his own.

THE little gears of thought got into motion in Johnny's numbed brain then. And he realized with a shocking impact the possible motive that lay behind the killing of his little partner. At last, Luke Middleton had brought his fight out into the open. He was no longer dealing from the bottom of the deck in his efforts to down competition to his Texas and Pecos fuel bid.

And somehow he had managed to turn Johnny's own men against him. That much showed in their faces.

Johnny moved away from the door to secure his rear from attack by Sevensky. Standing there tall and straight as a spring willow, with a flat-crowned Stetson shoved back on his blond head, he faced them. Only one gun dangled at his lean thigh, and his hand hovered close above it, knowing full well that he might be called on to use it at any instant.

"I reckon I know now what you're thinkin'," he began quietly, with a deep hurt riding his voice, "and that they ain't no use for me to deny something I ain't actually been accused of. But you're all wrong—and the first man who wants to carry this thing any further will shorely stop lead."

The matter might have come to a head then, had it not been for the intervention of old Pop Sanders. The oldster had long been a kind of special crony of Johnny's, and now he pushed through the door to stand beside the younger man, his round face bristling with rage.

He spit into his hands and rubbed them together in a businesslike manner before he began talking. "Listen to me, you limber brains. This is an affair for the sheriff to settle, and he's out of town today. And what you think you've got on Johnny Fallon don't amount to a kick from a coyote's whelp. Now scatter out of here, by hell, or I'll scatter you myself with my bare hands."

For a moment the mob clung uncertainly together. They respected the old T&P engineer's opinion and the weight of his influence, and even the boldest of Middleton's men were hesitant about making the first move. Then gradually some of the more sober-minded ones began to move away, taking a few of the hotheads with them.

Johnny turned to Pop, white-faced and bitter. "What's all this about?" he demanded. "Why should they think I killed Zach?"

Sevensky had come out of the undertaking parlor by this time, and stood glowering at Johnny. The whole side of his face was beginning to swell, even into his thick, sensuous lips. Hatred lay full within his smouldering eyes, and before he strode silently away, Johnny had a strong suspicion as to who killed Zach. It was all he could do to restrain his gun-hand.

"Johnny," Pop said, in answer to his questions, "mebbe you can tell me what it's all about. Only thing I know is that Sevensky says he heard a shot just after you and Zach went to the mine, and that when he got there Zach was layin' dead on the track that leads down to the ramp.

"And all your men say they heard you and Zach havin' one hell of an argument before you left camp. It does look a mite befuddled, Johnny."

Johnny looked at Pop, tears climbing high in his eyes. "Pop," he said huskily, "Zach was about the best friend I ever had. We did have some hard words, but I couldn't kill him, Pop—no more than I could kill you."

The old engineer reached out a gnarled hand and patted Johnny clumsily on the shoulder. "I know, son, I know," he agreed slowly. "But you better keep your eyes peeled. Because whoever gunned Zach is out to get you also. Mebbe you got ideas who it is, huh?"

Johnny nodded, then moved on into the undertaking parlor, his thoughts in a hellish turmoil, his brain numbed and chilled by his loss.

ALL the remainder of that evening and far into the night Johnny sat in the parlor of Williston's undertaking establishment, brooding and silent. He

had no words for anyone, not even glum old Mr. Williston, who passed from time to time and tried to cheer him.

And with each tick of the big clock on Mr. Williston's wall the fury that was within Johnny rose a bit, fanned by knowledge of the injustice and brutality of what had happened. He foresaw that there would be no peace left in his life unless he got the man who had bushwhacked little Zach. If Sevensky it was, then Sevensky was his man. And there was also suave and spotless Luke Middleton, who won the Hot Spot mine on a crooked turn of the cards. He was the guiding hand back of this corruption.

About ten o'clock Johnny could no longer stand the closeness of the room and his own driving thoughts. He went out and climbed aboard his rangy chinquapin and headed back along the track trail toward his Sunfire Mine. Somewhere out there he hoped to find evidence beyond dispute that Sevensky had killed Zach—and something that would clear his own name of the stigma of dishonor that would forever cloud it otherwise.

He reached the little corral where he and Zach had kept their own personal mounts, as well as the Mexican burros they used to pull the coal from the mine. It was lonesome here, lonesome and quiet beyond words, with Zach gone.

The moon was a great lonely ball of smothered flame in the purple sky, and a brightening canopy of stars fanned outward toward the distant horizons. Around the sweep of the hill a short distance lay the ramp that he and Zach had erected with their own hands to fuel old Pop's little 36°. East and west lay the ribbon of wood and steel that was to have brought them riches, and in the far distance a few lights glittered where Escalante City lay only half asleep.

Johnny skinned the saddle from his chinquapin, then trudged wearily down toward the gaping drift mouth. It was here, they said, that Zach had been killed —shot in the back.

Johnny saw where he had fallen. The men had been careful not to erase that sign. In the moonlight he strode over and stood just where Zach must have stood when the fateful shot was fired.

Looking about him, he tried to figure out from which direction the shot had come. Scrub oak and thin pine hedged in narrowly upon the spot, and a sniper could have crouched almost anywhere out there. But somehow Johnny got the idea that the shot must have come from the dark shaft of the tunnel.

He strode toward the opening, picked up a mine light at the outcropping and touched fire to it. It sputtered tawnily in his hands as he bent to enter the tunnel. All was still and oppressive in here. Water dripped from the roof into little puddles along the track, and he could hear their splashing sound even above the grind of his own footsteps.

ONCE he stopped to listen, heard only the settling groans of the hill above him. He wasn't frightened at this familiar sound, because he knew the tunnel to be well and stoutly timbered. But there was something else that made him uneasy, some strange, inexplicable mood that had settled upon him. It was akin to melancholy, but more deeply charged. It grew upon him as he neared the face of the coal.

In the heading he saw the last shot that Zach had touched off. It lay in a great, black mass at his feet. Zach's pick and shovel lay there also, never to be used again, Johnny told himself bitterly.

Then he saw the shucks that had been flipped about the room. He picked one of them up, held it in his hands, thinking. It was wet and soggy, the tobacco black, and the shuck itself beginning to unfasten. Here was something, but not enough—only a finger pointing.

Because Johnny knew that Sevensky, of all the men who worked for him, rolled his smokes from corn husks. And this section of the mine was not Sevensky's working place. Sevensky had been here a long time, smoked many shucks. Sevensky was lying in his teeth.

Seeing that there was little else to be found here, Johnny dropped the corn husk cigarettes in his pocket and moved again toward the outside. But before he reached the drift mouth, however, the shadowy figure of a man loomed up down the track in the moonlight. Johnny stopped quickly, killed his light and waited.

But he had not been quick enough, because old Pop Sanders was calling to him a moment later. He had seen the flare of Johnny's light.

"Come out of there, and hurry, Johnny," he yelled into the neck of the tunnel.

Wondering what could be up now, Johnny hastened to reach the oldster. Old Pop, Johnny saw, glistened with beads of sweat, and his wet shirt clung tightly to his round body. On the track below the ramp he saw the lights of No. 369 probing the false dawn, and heard the whistle of steam from leaky lines. But Johnny hadn't heard her arrive.

Old Pop was the first to speak. "Sevensky and his mob are on the way here, Johnny—all lickered up and a-rarin' for a necktie party. They'd been gone a long spell before I learned about it. Might be here now, hid out in the brush, because I didn't see no sign of 'em along the way. You better vamoose, *muy pronto.*"

"And the rest of my men?" Johnny asked slowly.

"Only Sevensky, I heard, was with 'em. But the others ought to be headin' this way soon; it's most daylight now. You better saddle and ride, Johnny."

For a moment Johnny's bitter eyes probed the gray-flushed sweep of prairie and rolling hillocks toward Escalante City. The act was impulsive. He didn't expect to see anyone out there. But even as he stared out into the opacity he heard the clop of hoofbeats around the turn of the hill.

"Somebody now," he said, tensing. "Reckon I ain't got time for a getaway."

POP shoved him quickly toward the drift mouth. "Hide in the mine till they're gone," he whispered. "I'll tell 'em you got away. They'll believe me."

"I hate to do this, Pop," Johnny growled. "They might take a notion to rawhide you for warnin' me. They're sure to guess that."

"Get in there," snapped the oldster, "and stay till I come for you."

Without further urging, Johnny dived back into the blackness and shoved toward the face of the coal. Reaching it, he glanced back. Already men were moving around out there, circling old Pop and gesturing angrily. Johnny couldn't hear what they said, but he was sure that they were holding Pop accountable for the escape of their prey.

Sevensky was there, big and drunken and spoiling for trouble. His attitude worried Johnny; even sober, Sevensky was mean and impulsive, but liquored up he was likely to be more violent and relentless. Presently they passed from view, however, and Johnny prayed that old Pop had been able to pacify them.

Yet he waited for a long time, and when the oldster didn't reappear to tell him that the coast was clear, Johnny began to get worried. Reproach flecked him with its long, keen tongue, told him he should never have let Pop stand front for him. Sevensky and his mob just might decide to vent their spleen on him.

He waited until his conscience would no longer let him sit still, then arose and moved cautiously toward the drift mouth. No sound came from the outside, and Johnny half hoped, half feared, that they were gone. Finally he moved out into the breaking dawn, stood for a moment looking about him. On the rails below the ramp still sat No. 369, her steam low, but with lights still fingering the approaching sunrise.

Old Pop was nowhere in sight, and Johnny knew that what he had feared was true. Sevensky had taken the oldster. But cold reason told Johnny that Luke Middleton must surely have given orders that the Texas and Pecos engineer be not molested. That would react against his chances of getting the contract. But Johnny well knew that a lynch-bound mob would break all restraint in the swell of its own mad desires.

With full realization of this danger, Johnny wasted no more time. He plunged down the embankment toward the little engine and climbed aboard. Pop was taking this rap for him, and the thought drove Johnny to a frenzy of haste. He ladled coal into the cavernous maw of the firebox, bitterly cursing the time it took to raise steam.

He knew that little 369 was the only means by which he could overtake Sevensky and his men. Already they had too much start on him to use a horse. It was a lucky day, he reflected, when old Pop had shown him the fundamentals of running an engine.

After an interminable time the steam began to pulse through No. 369's steam lines. Johnny waited impatiently until he thought he had sufficient steam to roll her, then opened on the throttle. Her drivers turned slowly, and she began her backward push toward Escalante City.

Johnny kept stoking her with a devil's fury, all the while constantly watching the trail that ran beside the track, for Sevensky and his men. He didn't know

just what he would do, once he overtook them, a single man against perhaps a dozen. He only knew that he couldn't let old Pop take this rap for him, even though it cost him his own life.

THE rattle of No. 369's drivers and the almost unbroken roar of her staccato exhaust, Johnny knew, would announce his approach in time for Sevensky and his mob to take cover, or do whatever else they deemed necessary. But that was a chance he'd have to take.

He was almost six miles from the mine, and running at a fast clip, when the tender left the rails without warning. Then came the rending, swivel motion that pulled the cab after it, the whole hurtling toward the shallow ditch line.

Instinctively, Johnny dropped his scoop and grabbed for a hand hold, but missed. A moment later he was spinning toward the coal-heaped tender. Then came the whistle of broken steam lines and the thunder of ruptured steel. Coal from the tender deluged Johnny, and the hot breath of live steam engulfed him. He held his breath and began a mad scramble to reach fresh air.

He could tell that the little engine was lying on her side, and that he would have to escape through the cab window above his head. For a moment that seemed impossible, with the weight of coal pinning him down; but with a tremendous lunge, he lifted some of the tonnage from him and began his upward climb.

One hand hooked over the window and he pulled himself into the clear. Steam swirled and eddied about him, blistering the exposed parts of his body; and he dared not breathe, for fear of searing his lungs. At last, however, he pulled himself through the window and dropped to the ground, gasping for breath.

But almost as he emerged he saw the approach of a single rider. It was big Sevensky, astride Johnny's own chinquapin, with a rifle clutched in hamlike hands. Sevensky's whisky-flushed face was twisted in a wolfish grin, his small eyes glittering with elation.

"Well," he gloated, "looks like we're goin' to have our necktie party, after all."

Others were emerging from the bushes beyond him now, all of them Middleton's men, and old Pop rode in their midst, hands bound to his saddle horn. The oldster's face was a twisted mask of fury. He was about ready to explode.

Sevensky was talking again. "Well, Mr. Fallon, you're sure in one hell of a mess. You've killed your pardner, stolen and wrecked a Texas and Pecos train, all in a short twenty-four hours. Too bad, hombre, it was all for nothin' because now you're aimin' to swing."

BY THIS time old Pop could restrain himself no longer. "Sevensky," he bellowed furiously, "you're a lyin', backshootin' refugee from a coyote's den. You'll never get away with this. Don't you know that them investigators will take just one look and see that this engine was wrecked—and not by accident neither?"

But the smile on Sevensky's face only widened, and a new light came to his eyes. "Why, Pop," he ejaculated in mock surprise, "didn't you see Johnny Fallon fix that wreck with your own eyes? Didn't you leap from the cab just before the wreck and try to plug him for doin' it? Of course you did, only you and him won't be around to tell no inspectors about it. Every last man of us saw Fallon shoot you, and then we got him to sort of even the score. Pretty neat, eh, Fallon?"

Sevensky was still sitting aboard the chinquapin, rifle straightened out on Johnny, and Johnny had to listen hard to hear what was said. It was difficult to believe that a man could be so wholeheartedly cold-blooded and merciless, but Johnny knew that Sevensky was capable of carrying out his scheme. That would set Middleton up in perfect style for the contract and probably earn a nice, fat bonus of Sevensky—blood-money bonus.

Only one choice remained to Johnny, and that was the manner of his death. Since death seemed inevitable, he elected to go out fighting, take as many of these men with him as possible—Sevensky first.

With a blinding, last-chance sweep, he snaked his gun and came up shooting. Sevensky, with the self-satisfied grin still on his whisky-flushed face, grunted, then slipped quietly to the ground. Again Johnny triggered with telling effect, then began his retreat to a safer position. He knew that he would have no chance against the combined guns of this outfit, once they came out of their shock and got going.

Just as he rounded the tender of the little engine, the mob cut loose on him. He heard the bullet hit the sheet metal and ricochet whiningly into the brush. But for the moment Johnny knew that he was safe—safe until they fanned out into the brush and started sniping at him with their rifles.

The thought came to Johnny that even now he might make good his own escape, by diving into the hemming brush and making a run for his life. He might succeed in eluding his pursuers, but that would leave old Pop to an almost certain death. And Johnny couldn't bear the thought of not standing by him until the last. It was the only decent thing to do.

Then above the hiss of escaping steam and the rattle of gunfire came another sound—the rapid pound of hoofs on the trail behind him. Johnny whirled instantly, and could scarcely believe his eyes. For the newcomers were his men, headed by Mort Duke, old Pop's young fireman, and in their midst, obviously a prisoner, rode big, sullen Luke Middleton.

EVEN as he looked, Johnny saw his Sunfire men open up on Middleton's outlaws. His heart swelled almost to bursting with pride and gratefulness. At last his men had seen the error of their suspicion, and now they had come to atone for their mistake. And there was no mistaking the ferocity of their attack.

Sevensky's men, leaderless now, recognized this at once. They snapped a few quick, futile shots into the ranks of Sunfire miners, then whirled and spurred their mounts pell-mell into the brush, forgetting old Pop in their mad haste to save their own skins.

They were gone almost as abruptly as they had appeared beside the wreckage, and Johnny held no grudge against them. For they had been led into this thing by big Sevensky, believing him to be right in his accusation. Only Sevensky and Luke Middleton were guilty, Johnny felt, and Sevensky had already paid the supreme price of his guilt.

Old Pop wasn't smiling now. His round face was sad and melancholy as he surveyed the wreckage of little 369. Johnny strode rapidly over to him, knowing that he owed his life, twice within the last twenty-four hours, to the oldster.

"She can be fixed up, Pop," he said cheerfully. "A good boilermaker can take the kinks out of her lines in no time, and patch up her battle scars, and you'll be hauling Sunfire coal with her next week. Reckon you and me know enough to pin the guilt where it belongs this time."

With this, Johnny bent swiftly and began searching Sevensky's pockets, just as though he knew what he was looking for. He found it soon, a crumpled statement made out to Lee Sevensky on Luke Middleton's Hot Spot mine stationery, dated as Saturday last.

He arose triumphantly and faced the glowering Middleton. "This is all we need, Luke," he said cheerfully, "to link you up as the old bell-yoe of this outfit. Sevensky was working for me—and on your payroll. What were you payin' him for, Luke?"

Luke Middleton bared his teeth in a wolfish snarl, his little black mustache bristling. "Go to hell," he snapped.

"Mebbe he's the one that killed Zach," growled one of Johnny's miners, hatred twisting his face.

Johnny shook his head negatively. "No," he replied, "he had it done, I reckon, but Sevensky is the man who fired the shot. I knew it when I didn't hear old Pop's little engine pull under the ramp a while ago. Sevensky said he heard the shot that killed Zach, but he was lying.

"He couldn't have heard the shot, if he had been outside the mine, because Zach was killed from the inside. The sound of a shot wouldn't have carried that far. Sevensky killed him—and he smoked a lot of corn shuck cigarettes while he was waitin' for Zach to show hisself."

"Well," old Pop summed up the situation pretty completely, "that's what I call hangin' two buzzards on the same rope. And I don't reckon they's much question about who'll get that Texas and Pecos fuel contract now, eh, Johnny?"

Medicine-Maker's

By Glenn Low

I

TOP cowhand Harry Dodd, now trick ropester with Gus Blick's Wonder Medicine Show, sighed heavily and turned over, wondering why Blick and the others couldn't let a fellow get a little sleep. They kept yelling and pounding.

"Hey, you, Dodd!" Blick was roaring. "Wake up! Wake up, Dodd, you good for nothin'—"

Dodd realized the wagon wasn't mov-

Pistol Poison

Unusual Novelette

When ace ropester Harry Dodd joined up with that traveling carnival, he didn't know he had been booked to perform a specialty act. But instead of throwing a riata, Dodd had to play the leading role in a six-gun show.

ing as it had been when he'd crawled in to bed down behind the props trunks and bales of canvas tenting. This was strange, considering they'd intended making the forty miles from Rimglow to Wuputi without stopping. The wagon should be on the move, unless he'd slept longer than he thought. He opened his eyes, sat up. It was dark. Night . . .

Why, he'd been asleep since right after daybreak.

Hot urgency in Blick's voice knocked the remaining sleep from him. "Dodd, wake up! Zerrett's been killed."

He blinked, scrambled to hands and knees. Maybe they'd been attacked. Maybe the angry citizens of Rimglow had organized and followed them out on the river trail. The sheriff had ordered the show out of town, forbidding Blick to sell medicine there. Perhaps a group of vigilantes had ridden them down and—

"What's up?" he asked, piling out from behind the trunks, remembering that his guns were back in the cook-wagon.

"Bido's got loose," informed Blick. "Zerrett was goin' in to clean his cage, and the big devil jumped him. Tore his throat plumb out before we could get to our guns, then took after us. We had to get into the cage here to keep him from grabbin' us. When Ross slammed the door, it locked. So get a wiggle onto yourself and get us out of here."

All three of them—Gus Blick, boss showman, hulking, hairy-faced, and beady-eyed; Sebb Ross, the little dried-up gunslinger, who did fancy shooting with the show; and the knife artist, Hack Willos, fat, shifty-eyed, sneaky—were locked inside the ape's cage. The cage was a penlike affair, built onto the back of the stage wagon.

"Where's the key?" inquired Dodd. Only the seriousness of the situation kept him from laughing at the three irate showmen, staring angrily from between the bars of an animal cage.

"In Zerrett's clothes, likely," said Blick. "You'll find what's left of our cook over there behind the fore wagon."

DODD glanced around in the dark. The only light came from a stage flare that had been stuck in the ground and lit before the ape's escape. It was almost burned out. He lit a lantern and went behind the wagon. What he found made his blood run cold and put a big, fuzzy lump of dryness in his throat. Zerrett had been the nearest to a friend he had in the outfit. The little cook's throat was torn out, as if it had been caught in the twisting jaws of giant nippers.

The others could not see Dodd as he knelt beside the body. He found the key to the cage in a vest pocket, but before finding it he found a .32 revolver in a coat pocket and with it a letter, addressed to him.

The caged showmen were cursing, urging him to hurry; nevertheless, he took time to open and read the letter.

Dear Harry:

When the sleeping potion Blick slipped in your coffee wears off and you awake and find this letter, I hope it isn't too late for you to get on your pony and ride. I'm leaving now, just as soon as I clean Bido's cage, put him in a last feed, and stick this letter in your shirt pocket.

Blick, Ross, and Willos, are a bunch of crooks. The medicine they sell is just so much bunk. Besides, they're planning on giving up the show between here and Wuputi and go in for a little rustling. The show isn't paying since the public is getting next to their fake remedies. You saw how the sheriff chased us out of Rimglow.

You're a valuable cowhand, Harry, not a crook. So leave out like I'm doing before they drag you into serious trouble.

The rustling Blick is figuring on isn't the usual kind. He plans to raid the Standing 2 over east of Rimglow, old Rutherford Wickwire's spread. He's picked it because old R.W. has sold out his interest in the Wickwire-Mason Circus and salted down a lot of money in top-notch cattle. So get out now, son, if you don't want to end up at the end of a rope.

Sincerely yours,
CLELO ZERRETT

In spite of Blick's oaths and yells for him to hurry, Dodd looked down into his dead friend's face a moment, determinedly whispering: "If I ever find out that Blick is to blame for what's happened to you, Zerrett, I'll take him and his partners plumb apart."

He put the note in his pocket, not looking for a postscript that was on the other side, and went back to unlock the cage.

Knowing that Blick had drugged him with sleeping powders, the young cowhand was plenty mad. He reasoned they'd wanted him asleep while they planned this rustling deal.

As he unlocked the cage, so riled he didn't trust himself to speak, Blick said: "What kept you so long, Dodd?" He squinted suspiciously at the clean-eyed, lean-faced young puncher.

"The key wasn't easy to find," Dodd explained. "Found it in the last pocket."

He was moved to let them remain in the cage awhile to repay them for doping him. But he had other plans for getting even. Besides, the ape had to be recaptured or shot before it began murdering people. He'd need their help.

"Well, it's mighty good to get out of that baboon's corral," said Willos, the last man to leave the cage.

"I wonder where that varmint strayed to?" said Blick, looking around nervously.

"Off in the hills most likely," Ross said. "They tell me them critters can travel

mighty nigh as fast as a mule, and that they roam for miles."

Dodd had stayed at the end of the stage wagon, looking over the cage's interior. The cage had been cleaned and fresh feed put in. Yet, Blick had said Bido had attacked the cook when the cage was first opened for the cleaning.

THE ace ropester felt anger, warm and pressing, mount to his brain. Blick had lied. The condition of the cage proved it. They'd probably turned the ape loose on Zerrett after he'd refused to take part in their rustling venture. Ross spoke at his back: "You expect to see Bido hidin' there behind a shadow, boy?"

The gunslinger's voice was cold. It always was. He was a trick marksman, also a dead shot. He had a reputation for being lightning on the draw, and was known to be strictly fearless. He was small, with sleek, black hair, sprinkled sparsely with gray, and squint blue eyes that didn't know how to warm up. They even stayed icy when he smiled.

Dodd wasn't afraid of him. The ropester was the son of the fastest gunhand in the Swoop Creek country. His father was old Smoke Dodd, a cattleman who'd dulled his spurs, getting cattle-wise and bullet-tough, on the Pecos. He'd not neglected an adequate training for his son in the business of smoking-the-iron. Fellows on the home range were already calling Harry Dodd "Young Smoke Dodd."

Now the puncher held his tongue. Willos said: "What do you figure, Blick—ought we to go ridin' after that baboon critter tonight?" Willos was a squat, long-armed man with a seamy face and bright, close-set eyes.

"I reckon so," said the boss showman. But his tone didn't sound as if he meant it. "Dodd here won't mind stayin' behind and doin' the pot-wranglin', since Zerrett's dead."

Zerrett had done the cooking for the outfit, also had cared for the ape. Blick had bought Bido from a circus in Denver some months back, getting the animal cheap because it had turned vicious and the circus management had become afraid to keep it around. The ape had been the main attraction with the medicine show ever since, making a hit for the simple reason that most folks in the deep cow country had never had a chance to see such an animal.

Dodd hadn't had a chance to get acquainted with Bido, having only been with the show a few days. He'd joined up with Blick to learn something about entertaining before trying to get on with a first-class circus. Also to escape temporarily certain tendrils that were entwining around his future because of a pair of heavily lashed, deep blue eyes back at the Standing 2.

He knew he'd fallen in love with Iona Wickwire who'd just returned to the ranch with her father from a successful tour with the Wickwire-Mason Circus as a bareback rider. A desire to show Iona and her father, the famous circus owner and cattleman, that he, too, could go places under the big top had caused him to give up his duties as foreman for his father at the Lazy D. He had joined the medicine show, knowing all the while that the connection with Blick's outfit would last only until he could hitch on with a big-time circus.

He looked forward to the day when he could return to the Swoop Creek country as owner of a first-class circus and buy out for Iona and himself the biggest and best spread on top of dirt.

Furthermore, the present wasn't the best time for him to show Iona too much attention, as her father and old Smoke Dodd were talking lawsuit over who owned a certain important waterhole that centered their properties.

Now that he had Zerrett's letter and knew that Blick was planning to circle back to the eastern ranges and do a little rustling from the Standing 2, some changes had to be made in his plans, at least temporarily. Also his sense of fair play made him determined to prove that Blick was responsible for Zerrett's death.

He was turning from the cage when Blick came up behind him. "Right smart interested in that cage, ain't you, Harry?" the show boss asked, his voice ugly.

II

BLICK'S manner caused Dodd to believe that he had remembered telling him that Zerrett had not yet cleaned the cage when Bido attacked him. He turned quickly, thinking what a fool he was to leave his guns in the cook-wagon. Blick's face convinced him that the medi-

cine-maker had played it dirty with Zerrett.

His hand moved toward the little .32 in his coat pocket. He knew the baby revolver was no match for Ross's low-swinging .45. A glance over Blick's shoulder showed him Willos with a big target knife in his hand.

He started a reply to the show boss, then quit, coldly realizing these men meant to kill him. What a fool he'd been to stand and stare at the cage like that. One thing, they didn't know he had the .32. He might work a surprise on them—only he wasn't sure he knew how to manipulate the revolver. His experience had been with heavy pistols, never having any cause to fool with parlor guns.

Blick moved closer, his wide, dark face thrust forward. "What did you start to say, Dodd?" he said. "Maybe you was goin' to tell us that Bido'll do a lot of killin' of folks, bein' loose like he is. Is that what you started to tell us, boy?"

"He'll kill cattle, all right," Dodd said stiffly, fighting to control a temper that was forever causing him trouble. "Might be he'll kill some folks, too. If he catches them off a horse. We're goin' to have to trail him down, kill or corral him. If he gets into anythin' bad the law'll hold us responsible."

Blick was closer now, and suddenly he slapped the key from Dodd's hand. With a lightning movement, he grabbed the young puncher around the middle, lifted and pushed him into the cage. Before Dodd knew what was up he was looking through the bars of a locked cage door, trapped and helpless.

The three showmen whipped their thighs, roaring with laughter. "Good stunt, Gus!" complimented Ross. "Now we'll make money hand over fist, with an ape like Dodd in the cage."

They laughed again, slapping each other's backs. Willos said, "Dodd ain't no ape, he's a natural born monkey."

"I made a slip when I told him that Bido jumped Zerrett before the cage was cleaned," confessed Blick. "He ain't so dumb for one of them Swoop Creek cowpokes, noticin' a thing like that."

"Guess he'll keep where he is 'til we get back," said Ross.

"If we ever get back," opined Willos.

"I intend leavin' him right where he is," Blick said. "We're off the main trail over here next to the river. It's a heap safer'n shootin' him. If we can corral the ape and stick him in the cage with Dodd, then the sheriff, if he does run across a couple of corpses along about here, can't say anythin'. Unless he wants to string up an ape for the killin's."

"You're right," agreed Ross. "No use clutterin' up our trail with killin's, when it's onnecessary. If anybody does ride this way, then Zerrett's body'll be found, too. So suppose we leave a note fastened to Zerrett's shirt, informin' that Dodd killed him by turnin' the ape loose, and that we've gone to Rimglow for the sheriff."

This suggestion met with complete agreement. They moved the cook's body over in front of the cage, wrote a note and pinned it to his shirt, then unharnessed the horses from the wagons. There were two extra horses, Dodd's cow pony and Zerrett's lean gray. These they turned loose, then saddled up and rode away.

Blick called back, "If that ape comes back, Dodd, you might beg his indulgence for swipin' his boo-dwar."

THEY laughed at that; then in a few minutes the sounds of their horses' feet died. Dodd began building a cigarette. When he'd rolled the smoke and stuck it between his lips, he struck a match on his thumbnail and lit it. In reaching for the match his fingers had touched Zerrett's letter in his shirt pocket. He pulled it out, and holding the glowing end of his cigarette close over each word, read it again. This time he turned the page and found the postscript.

> Harry: I've just found out what Blick really means to do. He's going to kidnap old Wickwire's daughter and hold her for a big ransom. They ain't going to steal no cattle, but a girl. The low-lifed snakes! And they keep talking about a man named Stokom. It seems like they got some hold on this man.
>
> I heard them mention that Stokom would do what they wanted, or they'd tell something on him that would wrap a noose around his neck. I'll be at Rimglow waiting if you need me, Harry. We've got to break this dirty business up and make sure Blick, Ross, and Willos get what's coming to them.

Zerrett wouldn't be waiting at Rimglow now, but maybe he wouldn't need

any help to beat Blick. Dodd gritted his teeth, seething with anger, wadded the letter, shoved it into his shirt pocket. He'd want to show Sheriff Toby Lensell the letter later. He took the .32 from his coat and went over and examined the lock on the cage door.

Smiling grimly, hoping that Blick and his cronies were far enough away so that they wouldn't hear the gun, he pressed its muzzle against the keyhole in the lock and pulled the trigger. They'd made a mistake when they hadn't searched him. The baby revolver certainly had come in handy.

For a moment the significance of what happened failed to strike Dodd, then his heart seemed to chug once and stop. He tried it again, and again the .32's hammer clicked flatly over an empty cylinder. Empty! The gun wasn't loaded. . . .

A few miles distant from the abandoned medicine show wagons the big killer ape crouched in the darkness as Blick and his henchmen rode by, then it fell in on their trail, covering the ground in a long, vengeful lope.

A moment ago Dodd hadn't been greatly worried, believing he had a ready means of escape from the cage. Now, thinking of what was in store for Iona, he was scared. In rage and disgust he threw away the .32. Then his head began to cool and he remembered that there were shell for the gun in Zerrett's pockets.

He could reach the cook's body by lying flat on the cage's floor and reaching down. This he did, and in a moment his fingers were fishing shells from the dead man's coat. His hopes were now surging gladly; but everything went cold again when he noticed that he'd thrown the gun out of reach.

Fate seemed to be in the game against him. The gun lay on the ground four wagon lengths away. Once he was free of the cage, he didn't doubt he could reach the Standing 2 ahead of Blick and prevent the kidnaping. He knew the country as well as he knew his own saddle leather; and the three showmen were total strangers in those parts. But his hopes of getting out of the cage seemed dead. There was no way now, and if no one came along in two or three days, the blazing sun and lack of water would finish things for him.

He was gripping the bars like a man gone daft, thinking of Iona, his mind going over all the plans they cherished for the future, when suddenly his cow pony walked in from the surrounding darkness. Seeing it, he felt his hopes warm up. The cage was built on a wagon, and the wagon, of course, had wheels. Here the ground was smooth and level. The pony could pull the wagon over to where the gun lay, if he only could figure how to work it.

He spoke to the pony, and it moved in closer. He slipped a hand into his pocket, and the animal, thinking a lump of sugar was in the offing, put its nose against the bars. Dodd slipped his arm around its neck, holding the mane with his other hand, then braced his body against the side of the cage. He spoke to the pony again. It obeyed, moving awkwardly.

THE tug of the wagon was hard on Dodd's chest muscles, forcing them against the bars. But he held on until the front end of the wagon was directly above the .32, then he let loose and the cage stopped.

"No sugar tonight, Ramps," he said. "But plenty when this business is over." As he spoke he was flattening himself on the floor. When he stood up he held the gun in his hand, a triumphant smile flicking his lithe features.

The first shot sprang the lock, and five minutes later he had obtained a Winchester and a packet of food from the cookwagon, had saddled Ramps and was hitting leather into the east.

One of the showmen had stolen his .45, belt, holsters, all; also a pair of riding gloves, prized highly by him because they had come as a present from Iona.

Daybreak found Dodd riding the river flats toward the Swoop Creek hills; and at noon, taking his time, he was riding the familiar Standing 2 range.

When he rode out on the Little Rim above the wide valley that cradled the Standing 2 spread, the sun was a two-hour span above the line of mountains at his back. He dismounted, pulled the bit from his pony's mouth so it could graze, then squatted amongst the rocks and munched bread and cheese. After he'd eaten and smoked he stretched out on the ground for an hour's rest, waiting for night before moving down the slope to await the coming of the kidnapers.

Dodd didn't think Blick would make a

try this night, but he meant to play it safe, and be on guard. When it was dark enough to suit him, he rode down to the Swoop Creek ford.

The ford was the only safe crossing for miles along the creek, and Blick would have to cross there to reach the Standing 2. He didn't believe the boss showman would chance swimming his horse in the deeper water above or below. Ross and Willos might be willing to gamble on a swim-crossing, but not Gus Blick, who was not an able horseman.

Dodd dismounted in some brush near the ford and settled himself for a long wait. And he got it. He waited all night, watching the moon and the stars, smoked cigarettes. Nothing happened.

He was not disappointed as he rode back to the boulder nest at daybreak. It was the coming night when he expected Blick to strike. He knew the showmen would not attempt anything in the daytime, when plenty of ranchhands were around.

After eating a cold breakfast, Dodd walked over to a break in the line of boulders. For a long time he stood looking down on the Standing 2's home layout, buildings, corrals, big, spreading ranch-house. Once he saw Mrs. Wickwire appear, then go inside again. Her movements had suggested a certain alertness, nervousness.

Dodd wondered if news of the big ape's escape had reached the Swoop Creek country. He bridled an impulse to ride down and talk with her, afraid that if he did the news of his presence might reach Blick. If this occurred, he knew Blick would made a fade or try to kill him before attempting to kidnap Iona. Still, he intended to warn the Wickwires of their danger before night.

The big spread below had a deserted look, and as the morning wore on Dodd wondered at this, and the absence of any cowhands around the place. It was high time the waddies were roping their ponies out of the corrals and hitting leather for the day's stint.

Observing the corrals closely, he noticed there weren't nearly the usual number of broncs present. It struck him then that old R. W. and his boys, for some urgent reason, were on the ride, had been during the night.

"I'd take somethin' big to keep them away from home at this time of mornin'," he told himself. "Probably been some manner of ruckus. Might be they've spotted some rustlers, or joined up with a posse."

Just then Iona Wickwire appeared at the front door of the ranch house and his heart jumped in tempo. At that distance he couldn't see her face so softly curved beneath wavy, brown hair, set with deep blue eyes behind long fringes of dark lashes; but he didn't need to, he could see it any time he chose simply by closing his eyes.

III

AT THAT moment Dodd remembered what Zerrett's letter had said about a man named Stokom. That man would be Ben Stokom, owner of the B-Bar-S, Dodd thought. Ben was an old friend of his, and he wondered what Blick and his cronies had on him. He knew Ben wouldn't be out with a posse, if there really was a posse on the move, as the old cattleman was saddle-shy since a bad fall had injured his back.

It was just possible that the showmen were hiding out at the B-Bar-S, waiting for a right time to pull the kidnaping. Dodd didn't really believe this was the case, however. He thought Blick meant to use Stokom's place as a hideout after stealing Iona, while waiting to collect the ransom.

Right then his topmost desire was to find out what had taken the Standing 2 riders away from the ranch, and he thought old Ben could tell him. If he ran onto the medicine-makers over at the B-Bar-S, so much the better.

Dodd had all but forgotten the escape of the killer ape as he mounted his pony and headed for Stokom's layout. If he needed help in cracking Blick, he didn't doubt that Stokom's riders would be glad to give him a hand.

The same deserted atmosphere that he'd sensed while looking down on the Standing 2 prevailed at the B-Bar-S. No one at the bunkhouse, no one out at the corrals, but as he rode up to the house old Ben hobbled out into the yard to meet him. Dodd judged by the old man's manner that, as yet, Blick hadn't put in an appearance at the ranch. Stokom's sight was failing, and he didn't recognize Dodd until the top ropester spoke.

At the sound of his voice old Ben's

skinny hand clawed at a holsterless hip. He wasn't packing a gun, but the movement told what he might have done had he been.

"Why you—you—" he sputtered, backing toward the house.

Surprised at the old man's manner, Dodd said, "Hold up, Ben. You're mistaken. You don't know who I am."

"Oh, yes I do," replied the cattleman. "You're Harry Dodd, and you slipped into Rimglow last night and murdered Sheriff Toby Lensell in his bed. And now you got a mind to pull the wool over my eyes, get somethin' from me. I reckon maybe you're after a horse—a horse that can take you out'n the country before the posse catches up with you and strings you up. Why, every man-jack on Swoop Creek is ridin' the hills and the river trails lookin' for you right now, you—you—"

"Lace your lip, Stokom," warned Dodd. "I got a mind you're a straight, fair-minded man, and it ain't your fault you've been lied to, I reckon. But I ain't been any nearer to Rimglow than right here since day before yesterday. Besides, I ain't killed anybody—yet."

Stokom stood for a full minute, staring into the young puncher's flinted face, then said, his voice slipping off weakly: "I told 'em you didn't do it, Harry. I told 'em I'd knowed you, boy and man, and that the cut of such a measly trick as that wasn't in the likes of you." He paused, licked parched lips rapidly, staring. "But they found your gun right outside Lensell's winder, and they found somethin' else, too—that pair of fancy ridin' gloves Iona Wickwire gave for a Christmas gift last year. And they told how sore you got when Lensell chased that crooked medicine show out of town the other day—the show you was hooked in with."

"I was sore," Dodd admitted. "I was set on showin' the homefolks how slick I am with a rope, but I wasn't that sore. What do you take me for, anyway?"

"Why—why do you come here, Harry Dodd?" asked the old man, his voice quavering. "What do you want from such as me?"

"You've already given me all I wanted," said Dodd. He now knew where the Standing 2 punchers were. They were scouring the country, posse riding, looking for him. "You might try believin' that I didn't kill Sheriff Lensell, Ben," he said. "That will be givin' me somethin' I want—somethin' I want mighty bad."

"But they found your gun, Harry," said the old man. "How'd it get there if you didn't—"

"You'll know in due time," Dodd cut in, turning his pony as he spoke. "I reckon you'll have visitors before long, Ben, and maybe they'll tell you."

RETURNING to the boulder nest, Dodd considered Blick's play. He knew now why his guns and gloves had been stolen. Blick was smart, killing the sheriff and using his gun and gloves to frame him for the murder, and by the same play luring the punchers away from the Swoop Creek ranches to go posse riding, so he'd have a free hand to steal Iona.

He felt certain the showmen would make their snatch attack on the unmanned, poorly guarded Standing 2 this night. Old R. W. would be no match for them, and it was likely that even the old man had joined the posse. . . .

As Dodd rode past the first few boulders on the Little Rim, a great, hairy head lifted above one of them, and little, fiery eyes followed his movements for a brace of minutes, then dropped out of sight, unnoticed.

The ace ropester dismounted at the boulder nest and rested until the evening shadows began to lengthen on the big slope. Then he mounted his pony and headed for a night's vigil at the ford, feeling in his bones that the next few hours would bring things to a head.

A quarter mile from his resting place the trail swung around a low promontory. There he was checked by sight of two riders bearing down on him from the north. They were riders from the Standing 2, big Bill Stevens and Snap Limberton. He knew them as hotheaded, dangerous men. They saw him a moment after he saw them, and guns flashed dully in their hands.

Whirling his pony, as a chorus of pinging slugs whipped past his ears, Dodd spurred around the short bank, then drove hard across a narrow open gully. Lead tore at his coat-sleeve. A slug smacked his stirrup iron. At the gully's edge a big boulder loomed pro-

tectingly, and as he pulled up behind it the shooting stopped.

After a second he risked a look over the big stone's top. Stevens and Limberton were nowhere in sight. He reasoned they'd taken shelter behind the bank. He watched the turn in the trail, sickened by this latest turn in events. If they held him there until dark, then there'd be no chance of reaching the ford in time to stop the kidnapers.

He believed that if old R. W. paid the ransom Blick would demand, as of course the old cattleman would, that the showmen would never chance freeing Iona. They wouldn't want her around to identify them later on, in case they were picked up before they could get out of the country.

Once Dodd tried calling to the Standing 2 riders, telling them that he hadn't killed the sheriff, asking them for a chance to explain. But they didn't so much as answer. He hadn't expected them to. The'd kill him, then ask questions. Later, if this happened, they'd feel badly about it, but little good that would do him.

He was watching the bank closely when a movement at its crest attracted his attention. At first he thought it was made by a big rattler moving off the ledge, seeking the warmth of the rocks since the heat of the day was past. Then he saw a head, round like a bullet, oblong, slowly weave into view. Dodd lifted his rifle, knowing full well that he could never bring himself to shoot Stevens or Limberton in the head. He'd readily chance plugging either of them with a body shot, but shooting to kill was out, unless he were driven to the very limit.

The head weaved higher and higher, then turned, plainly in view. A quick gasp ripped Dodd's throat as he found himself looking at the frowning face of Bido, the killer ape. He drew a quick bead, fired, then could have kicked himself for a reckless fool. A chunk of rock popped off the ledge inches to the right of his target, and the head went out of sight.

"Missed him," said Dodd. Now, though, he knew those Standing 2 waddies were not over there. The ape had probably swung down from the bank, and their ponies had bolted in fright. Dodd knew a horse that had never smelled or seen an animal like that couldn't be held. He remembered the extreme fright of his own cowpony when it first saw the big ape.

His desire was to ride after the animal, shoot it down before it killed someone, but darkness was close now and Blick had to be stopped, if possible.

Dodd rode swiftly down the slope, thinking that Stevens and Limberton would never guess his destination, as this way led toward the ranch, and possible meetings with other riders.

A choking sensation gripped him as he thought of Iona and her mother at the ranch house, and the big ape on the prowl. Locked doors and windows would not stop Bido. If he took a notion he would tear his way in. It made Dodd feel a little better to remember that Iona had worked with a circus, was familiar with such animals.

"She can shoot a rifle, too," he told himself.

AT THE ford on the Standing 2 side of the creek, he left his pony in a deep dry wash, then took up a position near the water's edge. And after what seemed hours of waiting he heard the approach of riders.

The sounds of the horses' feet told his experienced ear there were three of them, in a close group. He thought of Ross, and a cold chill ascended his back. When the shooting started, if it did, he meant to try first for the little gunfighter.

The moon went behind a raft of clouds as the riders drew near. They weren't talking and he couldn't be sure—they might be Standing 2 riders returning from the posse chase.

In another half minute a horse entered the creek, then two more followed. Dodd worked back the rifle's hammer, shifted his position slightly. He meant to give them a chance, meant to stand up and tell them to halt, to lift their hands, and if they didn't—well, Ross would be first, then Willos. Blick, the coward, would crawl then—crawl like a whipped puppy.

They had almost reached his side of the creek when he rose, was about to speak—

The first rider's horse whirled, snorted in fright, and raced toward the steep bank below the ford. The other two horses bolted, tearing past him. He had

no chance to stop them, but a few seconds later as the moon cleared the cloudbank he saw what had frightened the horses.

Bido! Bido crouching along the bank over there, dragging his big knuckles. Dodd had heard that apes dreaded water, would not wade in it unless to save their lives. His finger itched to pull a trigger and send a bullet through the big devil's head, but he knew that wouldn't do. Blick would hear, would become more wary.

Dodd scrambled back to his pony, easier in his mind now, thinking the ape would not cross the creek to the ranch house. Now Blick and the others had joined one another. Dodd heard them riding up the trail toward the Standing 2.

He could beat them yet. There was an open way along the creek, dangerous because of soft spots and slippery stones, but if he took it and got through he'd be at the ranch house ahead of them.

His pony snorted nervously, probably winding the ape. Dodd rode cautiously, letting it feel its way.

Ahead was a small gully. He saw its dark wound against the lighter spread of the level way. He was midway of this gully when something hit him in the side, then jerked at him. In the next moment Dodd was out of the saddle, strong arms clutching his middle. He heard his pony go running on toward the ranch. Then he hit the ground with a wallop that knocked him breathless.

His first thought—a cold, numbing brain-chiller—was that Bido had managed the creek somehow and had attacked him. Remembering Zerrett's yawning throat, he struck out with all his strength. His fist rubbed clothing, smashed into a soft spot, probably his attacker's stomach. Dodd knew then he was fighting a man, and let go with another punch. This one missed, and a fist crashed into his face. If this were one of the showmen the others would close in. Dodd couldn't hope to fight off three men, hand to hand. Again a blow beat at his face. He tasted blood, and struck upward. He heard teeth crash together as his knuckles champed into flesh, grated on bone.

There was no answering punch, and he struck again. His attacker wilted and fell on top of him. Dodd rolled from under, rose to one knee, fumbling in his pocket for a match. He had to know who had attacked him. If it were one of the showmen, then he only had two left to fight.

The match's flare showed him Stevens' face. The Standing 2 riders had followed him after Bido had scared their horses. He shook out the match, wondering about Limberton.

IV

STEVENS groaned, moved. Dodd relieved him of his .45, belt and holster, harnessed the gun on his hip, then whistled to his pony. The moon had found another mess of clouds and the darkness was solid, but he heard a soft nicker and a horse moving in the gully.

He ran to meet it, reaching up in the darkness to grip the saddle. Then, too late, he discovered that this horse already had a rider. The cold end of a gun prodded his neck, and Ross's deadish voice said:

"So you did get loose from Bido's cage!"

The moon sailed into the clear that instant; they stared at each other. Then it was caught away behind another drifting cloud and darkness closed in.

Dodd knew the gunfighter had spotted him when he struck the match to look at Stevens. Ross slid off his horse, pushed the gun deep into the ace ropester's stomach. Then he disarmed him, pitching Zerrett's .32 and Stevens' .45 away in the gully.

"Somehow you're wise to our plans," Ross said. "So I'll tell you, before I kill you, that Blick and Willos have gone on to the ranch to grab the girl. We heard you ridin' ahead of us, and I stopped off to 'tend to you."

Dodd knew they hadn't heard him. It had been Stevens or Limberton they'd heard. Ross started to speak, clearing his throat easily, and at that moment a shot ripped into the night's stillness, coming from across the gully.

A bullet whined by the gunfighter's cheek. He jerked around instinctly, forgetting Dodd for the moment, and sent a shot in reply. Dodd took advantage of the instant when Ross's gun was off his stomach, and swung out, hard, in the darkness. His fist slammed against Ross's head. He heard the gunfighter go down, leaned over him as the gun across the gully roared again. He found Ross's gun, holstered it, was reaching

for the gunfighter to load him on foresaddle, for carting to the ranch, when strong moonlight suddenly rebrightened the land.

The gunman across the gully opened up as the moon found a clean sky. Dodd leapt away from the fallen man, swung into the saddle of his horse, whirled it up toward the trail, calling back:

"Watch that man, Limberton. He's the hombre that killed Sheriff Lensell."

A moment later the shooting behind Dodd stopped. How he'd missed being hit he didn't know. He was several hundred yards away, riding fast down the Standing 2's home trail, when the crack of a rifle lifted from back in the gully.

"That," he said, "is maybe the end of Sebb Ross."

He was soon to learn how wrong he was in this conclusion. Ahead of him the ranch house lights appeared, twinkling beyond the big trees in the side yard.

He rode in past the corrals, spurring his mount to top speed, disregarding the danger of Blick and Willos popping him off. The level area by the bunkhouse was empty, nobody in sight, no horses. He rode on, slewing his horse to a quick stop at the ranch house's front gate, swinging out of the saddle in a big cloud of dust.

With Ross's .45 in his fist he shoved through the gate, raced up the steps. The front door opened as he clumped onto the porch. Old Rutherford Wickwire was there, a rifle in his hands.

"You—Dodd!" he snorted, throwing the rifle to his shoulder.

Dodd ducked, rushed in. The rifle roared over his head. He tore the weapon from the old man's hands, threw it into the yard.

"Sorry, Mr. Wickwire," he panted, grabbing the old rancher by the shirt. "Get back inside. You've got to listen to me." His words were like whipcracks.

He heard Mrs. Wickwire, inside the house, cry out, calling his name. Someone came running across the big front room. At Dodd's back a gun roared. Old R. W. stopped struggling, slumped in Dodd's grip. The ace-ropester dragged him inside, eased him to the carpet, then whirled and slammed the door, bolting it.

WHEN Dodd turned around Iona was standing across the room, holding a pistol leveled at his chest. "You—Harry?" she gasped, her pretty face going pale.

"I didn't shoot your dad," said the puncher. "The shot came from the yard. It's a couple of crooks out there, and they're after—"

A shot ripped open the outside night; a bullet smashed a front window, crashing the oil-burner lamp on a stand, snuffing it out. Feet pounded over the front porch. Iona moved beside Dodd.

"Harry!"

He grabbed her, pulled her to him, held her tightly, whispered: "I didn't kill the sheriff. Please believe me, Iona!"

"I—I do believe you," she said.

Just then Mrs. Wickwire came through the door to the next room, most foolishly carrying a lighted lamp. Her face was pale, lips trembling. At almost the same moment Blick and Willos teamed up on the front door, sending their shoulders against it, crashing it in.

"Whatda you mean, Ross?" Blick bellowed, barging in. "Tryin' to pull a fast one—"

Dodd instantly knew what was up. He'd ridden Ross's horse to the house. They'd seen it outside, and thought Ross was there, maybe trying to double-cross them. He was thinking this the instant he swung his gun down on Blick. Willos was still on the porch, just behind the boss showman. A split second before Dodd pressed trigger, the knife-thrower opened up, shooting under Blick's arm.

Lead slammed into Dodd's chest. His head seemed to whirl and sail off his shoulders. Eternity, maybe only a fast second, and it was back again, and he was feeling the hard jounce of Ross's big .45 against the heel of his hand. Through a bullet-punched funnel of smoke he saw Blick jerk up, as if he'd been grabbed by the nape of the neck and hoisted ceilingward, then twist—go down, the gun at his hip streaming red.

Then Willos was there, leering evilly. Dodd kept on jerking trigger, surging forward. The kick of the gun was like the handclasp of a long lost friend.

Willos was retaliating. Something struck Dodd's left wrist, seemed to tear off his hand. He kept on. Against the frame of the door, Willos wavered, his knees rocking. Suddenly his mouth flew open and he dropped his gun. The smoke swirling, swirling, blotted the picture.

The gun in Dodd's hand went dry. One

—two—three— That was the hammer snapping weakly, driving the pin against empty shells. He quit, nausea surging up with him, choking him. A fog seemed to be winding around his brain.

"Iona!"

He saw her then, prone on the floor, pale, motionless. "Iona!" he cried hoarsely, trying to kneel beside her without losing balance.

"Dodd!"

He tried to face the door, tried to find the source of that cold voice.

"Dodd!"

It came again. He tottered, swung around crazily, then stiffened. The little gunfighter, Sebb Ross, was standing in the door, sneering, confident.

"I'm givin' you a chance, see," Ross said, his voice deadly, freezing with passion for battle. "You gave me a chance back there. You could have drilled me before you took my horse and left. So throw me your gun and I'll reload for you."

"A—chance?" Dodd said, his voice raking dry. Pain was reeking his arm, tearing his chest. It wasn't much of a chance. Ross was lightning rapid on the draw. But it was a chance.

He pitched over the empty gun. Ross caught it in his left hand, loaded it swiftly with shells from a vest pocket. He pitched it back. Dodd caught it by the butt and shoved it into his holster.

ROSS slowly reholstered his own weapon—a weapon Dodd guessed he'd taken from Limberton. That rifle shot when he was riding away from the gully had been Ross knocking over the Standing 2 puncher.

"Now," said the deadly voice. "Whenever you're ready. I'm lettin' you have first move, see. I said I was givin' you a chance."

Blick's body twitched at Ross's feet. Dodd glanced down at Iona, wondering what had happened to Mrs. Wickwire. His heart sank. What was the use now? Iona was . . . was . . . What was the use?

He looked over at Ross, gritted his teeth, fighting down the sickish feeling that sucked at his senses. "All—right!" he said.

Ross moved, his right hand slithering toward his hip. Dodd threw his arm.

Old Smoke Dodd's draw. His father had taught him well. "Don't jus' reach down and grab," the old Pecos gunslinger would say. "Throw your arm, son—throw it back and out—and down. The swing will carry it up. Then the gun's in your hand, and—"

He knew it, in that fast section of a split moment. He'd beaten Ross.

Only he didn't pull trigger. He couldn't. Neither could Ross.

In the instant past a great, hairy arm had slipped around the gunfighter's neck, a brown, long-fingered, inhuman hand had slapped his gun to the floor. Across Ross's shoulder the flat, angry face of the big ape leered at Dodd.

The ace ropester steadied himself, took sure aim, getting the flat, slanting forehead squarely under his sights. His thoughts breathed: *S'long, Bido!*

Then he pulled the trigger. And the .45's hammer drove the firing pin with a dead click. The gun had failed fire. He tried again, swiftly, while Ross's eyes bulged, his face turned blue.

Again that click. Ross had fooled him. Ross had stuffed the gun with spent shells. And by that cowardly trick the little snake had forfeited his own life. After Bido snapped the gunfighter's neck bones, he dropped him and made for Dodd.

Dodd dived for the gun that Blick had dropped, but the ape was in his path. Then long, hairy arms swung out and enclasped the puncher, drew him in against a flat, loose chest.

It was the finish! The end of the trail—a trail that opened wonderfully along the foot of a green mountain, a trail that followed by a clear, beautiful runlet. He was on Ramps, and beside him was Iona. They were laughing and chatting, holding hands as they rode. Laughing? Laughing . . .

"Harry! Harry!"

"Unn-huh?" he said, moving, feeling a million pain needles stab into him.

He opened his eyes. He was lying on the couch in the Wickwire's living room, and there—

Iona's hand was on his forehead. Gash, it was cool and nice! Then he remembered.

"Bido!" he said hoarsely.

RUTHERFORD WICKWIRE was there, a bandage around his left shoulder, to push Dodd back onto the

couch as he tried to get up.

"The ape! He'll kill!"

"No, no, Harry," soothed Iona. "Bido is down in the cellar. He's all right, and peaceful. He was eating apples a minute ago."

"Eatin'—apples?" Dodd blinked, gulped. This was all wrong. He was dreaming, maybe dead and dreaming, and—

"Father came to his senses just in time. Bido might have killed you, Harry," Iona said, speaking softly. "But father stopped him."

"Stopped him?" Dodd said, and his mouth hung open in surprise after he spoke.

"Yes, you see, we raised Bido from a baby. He was with our circus, then when Father and Mr. Mason sold out, the new owner mistreated him, and he became ill. But he loves father and me. Why, he obeyed like a little child when Father led him down to the cellar."

Dodd drew a long, loose breath and relaxed. "Miracles do still happen," he said happily.

After a minute, after Iona had kissed him and old R. W. had grasped his good hand, he said: "Where're Blick and the others?"

"Some of father's riders took Blick away—to Rimglow and to jail," said Iona. "He confessed to everything, to murdering Sheriff Lensell. The other two are dead. Blick went all to pieces when Father threatened to have the punchers string him up. He told about leaving you in Bido's cage to starve, and about turning Bido loose on some poor man named Zerrett."

"Ross killed Limberton?" queried Dodd.

"Yes," Iona said sadly. "But Stevens is all right. He's with the fellows who are taking Blick to Rimglow."

Old Wickwire spoke then. "Dodd, by gum, you're all wool and a yard wide! If it hadn't been for you them blame varmints would have stolen my girl here."

Dodd said, "They were out to drag a big ransom payment from you, Mr. Wickwire."

"I know it!" the old man fumed. "The dirty, low-lifed, snivelin', dad-rotted, black-hearted—"

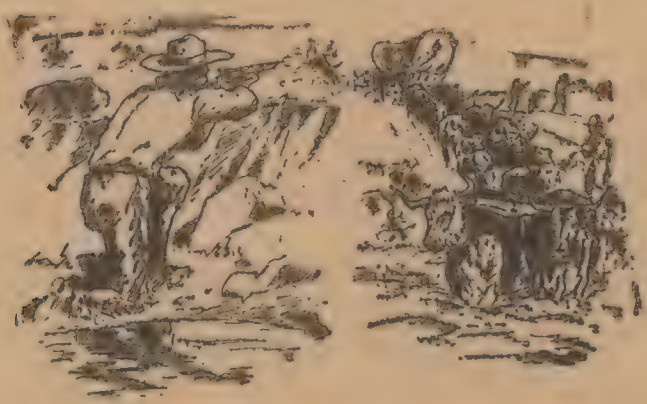
"Now, Rutherford," cautioned Mrs. Wirkwire, taking the old man's hand. "You know you had to give up the circus because of your high blood pressure."

He eased down a little, glaring at his wife. Then he looked at Dodd, his face softening. "Well, one thing darn certain," he said, "I'm goin' to give Harry and Iona that piece of land with that dod-rotted waterhole on it, so's me and old Smoke Dodd can be friends and pitch horseshoes together like we ust to."

Iona leaned close over Harry Dodd, smoothing the damp hair off his forehead. He grinned, said, "Ain't I heard tell of a story somewhere about a beauty tamin' a beast, and—" He stopped suddenly, remembering how Iona had fallen onto the floor, how she'd been pale and limp. "You're hurt, Iona," he said. "You oughtn't to be here with me."

"No, I'm all right, Harry," she said, smiling. "I got a little bullet knick on the head, but nothing to worry about. I'm perfect, Harry. Absolutely perfect."

He looked up at her, caught the brightness of her deep blue eyes, the warm flush on her cheeks. "You said it," he murmured. Then he closed his eyes to rest, to rest and enjoy just thinking things over.



Limpy Rides the Redeye Road

By Giff Cheshire

Limpy needed more than horsepower to roll that emergency freight. For redeye was the old jerkliner's usual fuel. Until the night a life-and-death decision forced Limpy into a two-hundred-proof showdown.

THE sick man on the bunk was buried in blankets, apparently asleep, and Seth Oakland was outdoors for a moment. The bottle, about a third full of whisky, was sitting on the table. Limpy Winthrop's hand trembled as it stretched out, then it hesitated. Flesh and nerves were screaming for alcohol. The bottle had been his that morning, until the big Oakland had taken it away from him.

Angrily, Limpy reached again. He had the cork twisted loose when the door opened. Before he could replace the bottle, Oakland had stepped in, the howling wind having drowned the sound of his approach.

"What're you doing with that bottle, Winthrop?" Oakland exploded.

"He's going to build a ship in it."

Limpy turned his head, still holding the bottle, a defiant look in his eye. Miles Scribner hadn't been asleep, after all. Limpy tossed his head. "By damn, it's my likker, and I want a drink!"

Oakland came toward him, holding out his hand. "Give me that."

Limpy backed away. Oakland was big enough to take it away from him, all right. There was no use putting up a scrap, but the burning craving mixed with the rebellion in him, and Limpy shook his head. Oakland came on in a bound.

Limpy pulled the bottle tight against his chest and turned, with Oakland's big arms reaching around him. He tried to twist free, and the bottle slipped. It hit the puncheon floor and crashed, the whisky running out over the pieces of shattered glass in tiny but pungent waves.

Oakland pulled back. When Limpy turned he saw the big man's cheeks had gone white. "Now, you've raised hell!"

"Don't blame it on me!" Limpy snarled. "If you'd left me alone, I'd of put it back!"

Oakland stroked his chin. "Mebbe." His eyes traveled worriedly to Miles Scribner, who was buried from sight in the bedding save for his fever-flushed cheeks. Limpy turned toward the shack's one window and stared out.

The two freight wagons stood out in front, with rain pounding on their canvas tops and streaming down their sides, the big wheels heavily coated with the red clay mud of these Broken Hills. The four teams of horses were tethered on beyond, poorly sheltered by the thin strand of jackpine, which was all this desolate spot afforded. They had pulled the wagons into the deserted trapper's shack about three hours earlier.

The wagons had left Wisterberg early the day before with machinery for the Black Tip mine, still some forty miles away over a mountain road as red and soggy as the mud clinging to those wheels. Oakland and Scribner were the drivers. Limpy had only hired out as a swamper for the trip, an extra man to have along in case he was needed.

The emergency that had risen had been one that Limpy could meet. About noon the day before, Miles Scribner had commenced to get the chills. By evening, when they made a wet, cold camp some place down the trail, he had been racked with fever. But they had tried to come on this morning.

By ten o'clock Scribner had been partly out of his head. Then they had spotted this abandoned shack and turned in to it. Oakland had put Scribner to bed in the tumbling old bunk and covered him deeply with their bedding. He had taken the whisky bottle away from Limpy that same morning, and had begun to feed it to the sick man. He had looked mighty worried.

Under normal circumstances, Limpy would have been, too. Scribner was dangerously ill, red as a beet, his dry skin giving off a faint stench. Limpy suspected that it was pneumonia, or something perilously close to it. They were in a tight spot, with none too many provisions. Scribner was in too poor shape to be taken back to Wisterberg and a doctor, or even on to the mine. But there had been the whisky for him. Now it was gone.

LIMPY told himself that he had intended to take only one drink to calm the uproar inside himself. He had left Wisterberg with three quarts, one of which he had killed the day before. Oakland had had no right to take today's quart away from him, for he was a better man with his tissues flooded with alcohol than he was without. But Oakland did not know about the third quart, which was hidden deep in one of the loads. Limpy couldn't get at it simply because it was still daylight.

Limpy refused to let himself worry about Scribner. He had come to hate the man as he had come to hate Oakland. The two were brothers-in-law. Miles Scribner, whose sister Oakland had married, was a cocky, whittle-tongued individual. He had hoorawed Limpy from the start with remarks such as he had just made about building a ship in the bottle, about his crawling back into the wagon, regular as a clock, to sneak a drink.

Limpy had never seen either of them up to three days ago. He was a stranger in this country. The sooner he got away from them again the better he would like it.

He had been drinking in a saloon in Wisterberg when Seth Oakland came in. The town, Limpy had learned, had been pretty well thinned out of men by a new gold strike deep in the Broken Hills. Oak-

land had come up to him and asked, "Listen, fella! You any good with horses?"

"Some," Limpy had admitted.

"Well, I need a man. It's like this. My brother-in-law and me've got a chance to haul in some machinery for the Black Tip. Stuff they need bad. On account of the weather and roads, they're willing to pay a thousand dollars for the haul. We figure we'll need a spare man. I'll pay you top wages, mebbe for no more than round-siding on a wet seat. But sober up. I don't like drinking."

Limpy had agreed to it because he needed a little cash. He had not told Seth Oakland that he hated a freight wagon worse than the devil hates good deeds. He figured that with sufficient whisky in him it wouldn't matter, and he had enough cash left to buy the three quarts.

Limpy turned back toward Oakland and the bunk, a gaunt, stooped man whose gray-streaked whiskers made him look older than his thirty-two years. Scorn filled him. These two were nesters, he had learned, tempted beyond their depth by a chance at a picayune prize. They knew nothing, actually, about freighting. They had crowded the gumbo road like hell because, he had also learned, the bonus pay hinged on their putting the parts to the Black Tip by Saturday night. That was still two days away—and forty sticky, treacherous mountain miles.

Oakland glanced at him. "Damn it, I'd like to break every bone in your whisky-soaked body!"

Limpy shrugged. He had got used to absorbing insults in the last three or four years when he had been working—when he worked at all—as a cook on various cow spreads over a wide reach of country. Yet, in spite of this strange situation, he was feeling a faint sense of superiority.

"It's what you get for not sticking to your plow," he snorted. "It's what you get for bucking weather like this for a two-bit jackpot." He grinned a little. "But I'm hard up, too. Look, you gotta stay here with Scribner. Split that thousand with me, and I'll put both your wagons to the Black Tip—in time, and alone."

Oakland stared at him. "You're crazy."

"I am like hell. Put the two wagons together and four spans on the one rig, and one *good* driver could cut it." He enjoyed the emphasis he put on the adjective.

"Why? You ever freighted?"

"Nearly ten years. And in *tough* country, mister!"

"And you think you could get through alone?"

"Don't think it. I know it." Limpy grinned again. "For half that thousand dollars."

After a long moment the eagerness that had come into Oakland's eyes faded. He shook his head. "Nope. Not even if you could. Because you're going to ride one of the horses back to Wisterberg and bring a doctor. Damn you, if you hadn't busted that whisky bottle it might have been enough to pull Miles outta this! Now I'm taking no chances. You're going to go back to town and bring out Doc Wren. And you're going to start pronto."

ALARM rose in Limpy Winthrop. Since Oakland had taken the bottle away from him that morning he had counted the hours until darkness, when he could safely visit the wagon and that last quart. It was thirty miles back to Wisterberg. If Oakland made him leave before night, he probably wouldn't get a chance to sneak it out to comfort him on the long wet ride. If Oakland suspected that bottle was there, he'd have it in a minute for Scribner.

"Why don't you wait till morning?" Limpy temporized. "Why not wait and see? Maybe Scribner'll be better. Probably it's just the grippe. A tough hombre like him can throw it off fast, sometimes." He hoped Scribner caught the sarcasm.

"I'm not risking it. I'll fix you something to eat and you can get going." He turned out toward the pole shed next to the house, where there was still a little firewood, to freshen the fire in the rusty old cookstove.

Scribner's weak voice, no longer derisive, said, "Limpy."

Limpy went over. "What?"

"I don't suppose you know what it cost Seth to turn down your offer. He'd never tell you himself, but I'm going to. He and Clara've got a boy. Nine years old. The kid's got a lame leg. They've been trying to raise cash to send him to a hospital the last three years. Dry-farming. They've never been able to cut it. That, Limpy, is why Seth was willing to buck this weather for a two-bit jackpot. I was visiting 'em, and offered to come along. I

thought maybe *you'd* understand that, Limpy."

Limpy stared at him. "It ain't my fault you got sick!"

"No. That was my fault. I'm not used to being out in the weather, Limpy. I'm a bookkeeper in a bank back home. But I've got to hurry. Listen, Limpy! Don't you go after any doctor! Get those wagons through, if you can really do what you say! Half that thousand'll help Seth and Clara out a lot. Do it, Limpy, no matter what he tries to make you do!"

He had barely uttered this last when Seth Oakland came back through the door, a load of stovewood in his arms.

It was only the thought of that quart of whisky secreted in the wagons, Limpy told himself, that made him interested in what Scribner said. At least he had to stall leaving for Wisterberg until after dark. And, contemplating the actual proposition of putting those wagons through by himself, he began to feel uncertainty. It was no question of his ability; it was. . . .

Tyre Winthrop had been one of the most famous of many renowned teamsters on the hell-haul through the Siskiyous to Jacksonville. They said he could turn one of the high-wheeled, high-bodied, six-spanned rigs around on a ten-foot road. And in the Siskiyous it wasn't even that wide in many a place, with blunt mountainside lifting above and tumbling below.

There is a last haul for every jerkline virtuoso. For Tyre Winthrop it had come with shattering abruptness. There had been a storm worse than this present one and there had been many warnings against the Siskiyous trail under the circumstances. But he had rolled his wheels.

He had beaten the trail, every combination of grade and turn, slide, rolling rocks and muck that the rainswept, wind-covered miles could throw up ahead of the spans. What happened no man could have foreseen. His big rig hadn't been on one of the throat-tightening elevations but at a relatively low point, just starting up. Abruptly under the weight of the big rig a patch of sodden earth had peeled from the lip of the trail, under his hind wheels. They rolled sidewise, the wagon slithering and suddenly angling upward.

This slowness, this outward evidence of minor difficulty, had deceived Tyre Winthrop. He hadn't jumped, sacrificing an excellent opportunity by rising on the footboards, long blacksnake singing. Then came the bigger cave-in that flipped the entire rig, wagon and straining horses, into a precipitous roll.

Tyre Winthrop spent three days pinned under the capsized wagon on the bottom of the canyon before the storm abated enough for anyone to come along and find him. He spent three months in a hospital, after that, while his multiple-fractured legs healed. But they had healed, enough to permit him to climb back into a wagon seat. It wasn't that which had kept him from it. . . .

THE terror started sweat when Limpy remembered it. Abruptly he knew that for ten times the bonus he could not put even the farm wagons of this nester pair through the forty miles to Black Tip. Riding the seat as a swamper, with no sense of responsibility and his nerves deadened with whisky, he had not been particularly troubled. But, alone—

The revived fear made his desire for whisky frantic. The smell of it still filled the shack so that tiny muscular spasms hit Limpy's jaws. He dragged his gaze from the broken glass on the floor, pinning it to Seth Oakland's big back. Oakland was frying bacon and potatoes, planning to feed Limpy, to get him dispatched for Wisterberg and a doctor as quickly as possible.

Miles Scribner raised himself onto his elbows. "Darned if that doesn't smell good, Seth."

Oakland looked at him quickly. "You hungry?"

"Kind of."

The relief in Oakland's face was evident. He said eagerly, "You must be getting better."

"Think I am. Ringing's left my head." Scribner sat up weakly.

Limpy was watching the sick man with narrowed eyes. He wasn't fooled, as Oakland seemed to be. Scribner still looked deathly ill, with his deep brown eyes bright with the fever. The man was trying to kill Limpy's return to Wisterberg for a doctor; he wanted the wagons to go on to Black Tip. Oakland wanted that, too, and because he wanted it so desperately he was grasping at straws.

Scribner swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and tried to rise. Oakland, dishing the food into tin plates, did not

see him slump back. Limpy Winthrop realized that he had to support Scribner's pretense, had to help stall that departure at least until darkness came. Glancing at Scribner again, he said:

"You look better."

"Yeah." Scribner gained his feet this time and took several tottering steps to the rough table, when he sank into a chair, his hands gripping the table edge tightly.

Oakland said, "Mebbe you'd better eat in your bunk."

"Never liked to eat that way. I'm really starting to feel pretty good, Seth. Give me some coffee."

They began to eat. In an objective way Limpy felt sorry for Scribner. He believed he was helping get Limpy Winthrop started for the mine, early in the morning. Limpy knew that he was not going to put their wagons through for them; that he could not. He hoped only to endure the three or four hours left until dusk when he could get to the secret bottle in the wagon. Time enough to figure out his next move after that. All he had to do was to dissuade Oakland from sending him after the doctor until then.

The hours wore away. Scribner did not go back to bed but sat in a chair close by the stove. At times Limpy could see how he steeled himself to keep from showing the chills that obviously were shaking him. Partly because he had not been forewarned of the man's intention, as Limpy had been; partly because he wanted so desperately to be able to resume the haul on the morrow, Seth Oakland did not watch his brother-in-law too closely. He stayed close by the window, watching the sky for a sign of a break in the weather.

A kind of exultation was growing in Limpy Winthrop. Night had been his own objective, and it had come. Presently he could make a natural excuse for going outdoors. He could slip around on the other side of the wagons and locate the bottle. He could have his drink. His taste images of it were so real that it was almost as if he had it to his lips already. He put off starting, secure in his knowledge of the imminence of it.

Scribner caused a change in his plan without warning—by abruptly toppling from his chair to the floor. Oakland wheeled around, staring, then dashed across the floor. Scribner was unconscious. Oakland lifted him and carried him to the bunk, covering him almost tenderly. He turned slowly to Limpy.

"He was fooling! The danged knothead! You might have been well on your way to Wisterberg by now!"

For an instant alarm shot through Limpy, but calmness returned abruptly. He nodded. "I'll get going!"

"Yeah!"

Limpy donned his slicker, realizing that this had helped him rather than otherwise. To hell with this two-bit outfit, he was going back to Wisterberg. He'd send a doctor out, all right; that was the only decent thing to do. But he wouldn't be back. And he'd have the bottle to nurse on the long, wet ride to town.

OAKLAND did not accompany him outside, for which Limpy was grateful. He would have to ride one of the broad, plodding farm horses bareback. It was going to be a slow trip. There was a little moonlight. He picked out what he figured for the best suited animal and untied it. Leading it by the halter rope, he stopped on the blind side of the wagons.

His groping hand found the bottle on the first try. He stuffed it inside of his shirt, so that his belt would keep it from falling. Its bulk was fairly well concealed by the big slicker. He swung onto the horse's bare back. As he turned around the end of the wagon the shack door opened.

"Go like hell, Limpy! Tell the doc to use the fastest rig in town coming out! Tell him to bring some whisky! You can take your time getting back with the horse. Looks like it'll be days before we'll need him."

Limpy said nothing as he jogged off down the ruts the wagons had made coming in. It was only a little way to the main road. His elbow pressed comfortably against the bottle so cold and yet so exhilarating against his body. He'd wait until he was well away from here before uncorking it.

He turned left on the main road, the farm horse jogging at a slow trot. A few hundred yards more and a clump of leafless locusts cut him from sight of the shack. He reached into his shirt and drew out the bottle, the spasms in his throat again. Savagely he gripped the cork, then he stiffened. He thrust the bottle into his shirt again and waited, listening.

The sound that he thought he had heard did not come again. It had been a soft, low noise, like the fall of hoofs in the deep mud. As he waited he still had the sense of an approaching rider. Yet, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see considerable distance in either direction. There was none.

A prickly feeling ran up Limpy's spine. He told himself harshly that it was only some animal that had moved in the darkness nearby, perhaps a cow. He could see nothing, but that must be what it was. Anyway, what difference would it make if he came upon other riders? They would doubtless be better mounted and would not slow to the pace of this old plug. Limpy reached for the bottle again.

He sat thus for a long time, the horse halted, his hand on the neck of the bottle under his arm. Now he heard nothing, but he was growing aware of a strange reluctance to go on to town. He kept remembering Scribner forcing himself to eat food that must have been nauseous to him, Scribner sitting by the stove trying to smoke and chin in a normal matter, secretly trying to keep his shakes from showing. Scribner had done that to forestall this trip to town. Scribner wanted the wagons to go on to Black Tip. Frowning, Limpy clucked to the horse and it resumed its lumbering plod.

Seth Oakland came to the door when he heard Limpy ride up. "What's the matter?"

Limpy swung to the ground. "I met up with some horsebackers going in to town. I asked them to send the doc. They can ride it a lot faster than I could." He reached into his shirt. "They had a bottle of whisky along. Better get a big shot into Scribner."

"Why—why—!" The joy in Oakland's voice warmed Limpy a little as he led the horse off to the pine grove where the others were tethered.

Limpy rolled out with the two wagons before dawn. Miles Scribner had begun to look better immediately after Oakland began feeding him hot whisky. Yet Limpy realized he had taken an awful responsibility into his own hands by not going for the doctor. Yet somehow, after the fight Scribner had put up, it had seemed a gross injustice to the man to let it subside into defeat. As he rolled up the red clay ruts, Limpy had a feeling that this was the way Scribner would keep wanting it through eternity, though the change of plan cost him his life.

Limpy noted with detachment that the fear was gone. Maybe it was still there, with himself too absorbed in other worries to think about it. There was a crippled kid with a whole life ahead of him to think about. The rest was merely the chips he and Miles Scribner and Seth Oakland were tossing into the game. . . .

IT WAS three days later when Limpy Winthrop tooled the empty wagons back up the ruts leading from the main road to the old trapper's cabin. Oakland was waiting outdoors, a curious expression on his face. He did not speak beyond a casual exchange of greetings. When they had tended the horses and gone inside, Limpy saw that Miles Scribner was sitting up in the bunk and grinning at him. He looked a little gaunt and pale, but it was easy to see that he was well on the road to recovery.

Limpy stood by the stove, soaking up heat. Though he looked tired, years seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders. There was a new and confident erectness to his head. Oakland grinned at him.

"That sawbones never did show up, Limpy."

Limpy found himself responding to the grin. "Them cusses must've forgot." His expression discouraged further talk. He had warmed his fingers enough that he could fish into his shirt pocket and extract the check the mining people had given him. He handed it to Oakland.

Oakland glanced at it, then looked at Limpy again. "I don't figure I got much of a claim against this. We'll cash it when we get back to town and settle up."

"She's all yours," Limpy said. He glanced at Miles Scribner, who was regarding him with a look that held nothing but respect. The contrast with the man's attitude four or five days ago struck him.

"I already got my pay," he concluded.

Headin' for a Hangin'

By Wilson L. Covert

His Colt leaped from holster to hand, jetting smoky flame.

Jud Folsom cut his string from the Rocker O because it had become a renegade ranch. But the brother of the girl he loved was boss of the long-loopers. And when Jud tried to save the wastrel from hangman's hemp, his own neck was measured for a noose necktie.

OLD TAL JARVIS hadn't been in his grave two weeks before Jud Folsom knew he couldn't work for Tal's son, Bart, who had become boss of the Rocker O ranch, joint owner with his sister, Nan. Bart Jarvis had given all the stockhands but Folsom their time, making the excuse that he must pare the ranch payroll to the bone.

It was true the Rocker O wasn't as prosperous as it had been in the past. And that, to Folsom's notion, was chiefly due to Bart's escapades. He had cost the old man a pretty penny with his gambling and drinking. And when, during a drunken brawl, he put a slug through a prominent citizen of Ocotillo, Tal had spent most of his available cash to defend Bart in court. The old man was fond enough of his daughter, but he idolized

Bart. He used to say, "I was a wild yahoo myself at his age, when I came up the Texas Trail. But I settled down finally. He will, too."

Now Tal was dead and Bart showed no sign of settling down to business. He replaced the older hands with a wild bunch he'd run with in Ocotillo, the scum of the cowtown, and Jud Folsom, top-hand, looked at them askance. If Bart was going to work cattle with that kind of men, the Rocker O was on its last legs.

Young Folsom wondered that Bart had kept him on the payroll. But perhaps Nan Jarvis had put her foot down when it came to firing Jud. She liked Jud. And Nan could be determined, though, like her father, and her mother, who had died three years previous, she excused Bart's shortcomings, always hoping for a turn for the better.

Early one morning, the new outfit returned to the bunkhouse in a boisterous mood, awakening Folsom. He thought they'd been on a spree in town until one or two complained of bullet wounds. When he asked questions they became close-mouthed and slightly hostile.

"You ask the boss where we was," Bib Taver, a buck-toothed fellow with notches on his gun, answered Folsom. "If he wants to tell you, it's up to him."

Jud didn't bother looking up Bart Jarvis. Riding out to the range after breakfast, he found what he half suspected he would: fifty or sixty Leaning A cattle belonging to Ab Arbuckle, a rancher on Dismal Creek. While Jud was looking them over, the rataplan of running horses made him hip in the saddle. He wouldn't have been surprised to see Ab's cowhands coming after their stolen stock, though the raiders probably had brought the little jag over the ridge trail where a thousand cattle could pass and leave no trace. As he observed that the riders were Bart and two of his tough hands, Folsom's jaw tightened as he swung his horse about.

Young Jarvis wore a grin, but his eyes were like steel chips in his dissipated face. Folsom spoke as the trio pulled the running broncs to their haunches.

"These Leanin' A's are a little off their range, ain't they, Bart?"

STILL grinning, Jarvis shook his head. "This'll be their new range, soon as we have time to work over their brands. Four of Arbuckle's hands were camped with 'em, on the way to town, when we happened along last night. Ab can afford to lose 'em, and there's other cowmen who won't miss a few head now and then, to help build up the Rocker O. And all you've got to do, if you stay on, is keep your mouth shut. I would have let you go, but Nan said no. I've got to humor her in some things."

"Or she'll find out what you're up to. I see." Folsom nodded slowly. "Well, I'm through, Bart. I cut my string, here and now."

"And he'll ride straight to his brother, the sheriff, and tattle!" exclaimed the buck-toothed Taver. "He'll put ropes around our necks!"

"I don't figure he will," stated Bart Jarvis. "He's sweet on my sister. He knows that no matter what I'd done she'd never forgive him if I stretched hemp because he squealed on me. Am I right, Jud?"

Folsom's rugged features were grimly set, masking his emotional conflict. He said, "It's hard to understand how your folks have stood by you, Bart, all the trouble you've made. I only know it's so. You're headin' for a hangnoose now, be sure of that. But I don't want to be the one responsible for you kickin' on thin air."

"I knew it," smiled Bart. "I'll tell Nan you didn't hit it off with the new hands."

"It's all right for you to trust him, Bart," spoke up Taver, his right hand sliding beltward. "But we ain't got any sisters he's sweet on. And he's the sheriff's brother!"

Folsom had caught the stealthy motion of Taver's gunhand. He ripped out his Colt and rocked the hammer. Taver, his draw shaded by a watch-tick, jerked in the saddle, blue steel slipping from loose fingers. A dark stain appeared on his shoulder. Over smoking .45, Jud regarded the other two. Both lifted empty hands.

Jud kicked his horse into a lope, facing back in the saddle until out of gun range. He rode steadily, entering the Rocker O yard just as another horseman swung off at the ranch house. Folsom recognized the lanky figure of Port Bennion, the new cattle buyer who had opened an office in Ocotillo a month or two ago. For years the firm of Ives & Odell had bought most of the cattle shipped from that district,

and Bennion had found it hard to get a foothold.

A trim, girlish figure came to the porch rail while Bennion was tying his horse. Folsom reined toward the bunkhouse. He would say good-by to Nan later. The new hands were lounging around the doorway. They shifted positions to let Folsom through, silent and watchful. The cowboy got his warbag from under his bunk, returned to his horse.

"Leavin' us?" sneered one of the tough hands, and Folsom nodded.

He secured his warbag behind the saddle, walked his mount up the yard. Port Bennion was seated on the ranchhouse porch. Nan Jarvis, catching sight of Folsom, ran down the steps.

"What's Bennion want?" Jud asked.

"He's here to see Bart about buying our beeves, though, goodness knows, we haven't many to sell. I told him we'd always done business with Ives & Odell, but he said he'd wait for Bart anyhow." Nan's dark head came just above Jud's shoulder. Her dusky eyes, resting an instant on the warbag tied at his cantle, were raised questioningly to the cowboy's set face. "Where are you going, Jud?"

"Cuttin' my string, Nan. Don't like the crowd Bart's hired. Had a run-in with Bib Taver a while ago."

Her face clouded over. "Shooting trouble? I don't like them myself, Jud. But you know Bart has always had his way. I'm afraid no good will come of their being here. If you leave—well, anything is likely to happen."

FOR a moment Jud was tempted to stay. Nan had some idea he could keep her brother out of trouble. But Bart was already in trouble up to his neck. Jud hesitated to tell Nan since it could do no good and would only increase her worriment. "When you can't get along with an outfit, the best thing's to clear out. Nobody's ever been able to put a checkrein on Bart."

Nan nodded somberly. "He's been dreadfully spoiled by all the family. But still he's my brother. It would break my heart if he—"

"Yes, I understand," Jud interrupted, almost roughly. It irked him that so much undying affection was wasted on a ne'er-do-well like Bart. But, for Nan's sake, he ought to do something to save Bart from the hangnoose. He couldn't do it, however, by remaining on the Rocker O, a target for back-shooters. "Nan, I don't want it to seem like I'm desertin' you. But it's best that I go now. If you need me for anything, any time, look me up at Ocotillo."

He held out his hand and she took it, saying, "I will, Jud."

The main street of Ocotillo echoed with hoofbeats when young Folsom rounded the corner where Ives & Odell's falsefront stood. The cattle buyers were standing at the curb, eyeing the troop of horsebackers coming up the thoroughfare. Jud saw his brother Cal in the van, stirrup to stirrup with Ab Arbuckle, the Leaning A boss. He reined up, nodding to Ives and Odell as they glanced around.

Cal Folsom, three years Jud's senior, was big and rawboned. A good choice for sheriff, elected the previous fall. Jud was pardonably proud of him. As their eyes met, Cal pulled his bronc to a stand. Hoofbeats stilled all along the line.

"Hello, kid," the sheriff greeted with a grim smile. "New gang of cow thieves has cropped up. Stole sixty head of beeves that Arbuckle here, was sellin' to Bennion. We're ridin' out to see if we can pick up their trail. Room for another man in the posse if you want to go."

Jud shook his head, feeling like a traitor. He didn't think they'd track the rustlers down, but if they did, he had no wish to be in at the death. "I got other business, Cal."

From the sidewalk, Ives and Odell jeered. "Nothin' like that ever happened when you done business with us, Ab," called Odell. "How come you're dealin' with Bennion? We'll pay the top market price for steers."

"I know," said Arbuckle worriedly, "but Bennion offered me more than the top price on delivery. Naturally, I'll sell to the highest bidder."

"But if the rustlers have 'em," snorted Odell, "you don't get anything."

"I'll show that bunch they can't drag a long loop in my bailiwick," declared Sheriff Folsom. "So long, Jud. Come on, men."

As dust rose from under fanning hoofs, Jud rode the other way, dismounted at the nearest saloon. Sipping beer, he did some hard thinking. Bennion's visit to the Rocker O, on the heels of the rustling, might be a coincidence, but

Jud thought not. Port had done so little business since opening his office that Jud doubted he could pay a higher price for cattle than Ives & Odell.

Knowing the risk he ran, Bart Jarvis must have been assured of a reasonably safe outlet for the stolen stock before turning night rider. Since the steers cost him nothing, he could sell them, rebranded as Rocker O's, to Bennion at half the market price or less. And both would profit.

If right in his conjecture, Jud would have to move cautiously or Bart would swing. He deserved to, but his sister wouldn't think so, and that made all the difference to Jud. It was long after sundown when Cal Folsom and his deputies returned. They jingled into the barroom where Jud had spent most of his time since the posse's departure.

"The trail petered on the flint ridge," Cal said glumly to his brother. "Didn't expect to find you still around. What's the reason?"

"Got fired at last, like the rest of old Tal's hands," replied Jud, low in his mind over the deception.

CAL was looking at him keenly. "Bart and his saddle-tramp friends will drink and gamble while there's a cow left to sell. Then the Rocker O will break up. But I feel sorry for Nan."

"So do I." Jud knew that his sheriff brother wouldn't let sympathy stand in the way of doing his full duty if he had an inkling of Bart Jarvis's guilt.

"Goin' to get another ridin' job?" asked the sheriff. "I'm only allowed two deputies or I'd put you on the county payroll."

Jud didn't want to be under his brother's eye, not with what he had to do. "Nobody's hirin' riders. I'll loaf a bit."

"Never knew you to do it before," said Cal, and turned to the bar.

For a week Jud kept long-range watch of Port Bennion's movements. During that time, the lanky cattle buyer left town only once. Two days later, the rustling of another bunch of seventy-five steers, townward bound from the Half Moon ranch, was reported by the wrathful owner. A posse dusted out of Ocotillo in a fruitless attempt to run the thieves down. It got about that Bennion had outbid Ives & Odell for those cattle, just as he had for the vanished Leaning A bunch. Jud knew he was on the right track, but the time for action hadn't come.

From the station agent, Jud learned that Bennion had contracted for cars for a hundred head of cattle. The puncher expressed surprise. Hadn't the Leaning A and Half Moon stock been gobbled up by the rustlers before they could be delivered to the cattle buyer?

"Sure, Jud," the agent replied, "but the hundred head are comin' from the Rocker O—if they get here. I wouldn't bank on it, with them hungry loopers so active. And all Cal's done so far toward catchin' 'em is wear out saddle leather."

Jud's hot retort to this criticism of Cal died on his lips. A lot of people were probably thinking the same thing. And he, Jud, was withholding information that would have put the sheriff on the right track.

Just fifteen days after he had quit the Rocker O, long enough for blotted brands to heal, a hundred cattle were driven to Ocotillo by Bart and his gun-tough hands. Cars awaited them. Jud Folsom was at the railroad pens while the herd was put aboard. The brand inspector passed it without a single objection, though there was no doubt in Jud's mind that sixty head in the shipment were rebranded Leaning A stuff. Either the inspector was getting a cut for his O. K. or the brand burning had been done most skilfully. But Jud held his tongue. He couldn't raise a question about the brands without entangling Bart Jarvis.

As the last steer was prodded up the chute, Jarvis swaggered over to Folsom, who leaned against the fence. "Never see cattle loaded before—and you an old hand?" Bart grinned boldly. "Sis sent her regards," he added, noting the cold gleam in Jud's eyes. "Let's have a drink."

"Best regards to Nan," said Jud. "But I'm particular who I drink with," and he stalked away, feeling the eyes of Jarvis and his rustlers stabbing his back.

Bart and his outfit dropped into Bennion's office before leaving town. Not until then did Jud quit the saloon, where he had been listening to other patrons discuss the surprising fact that the Rocker O had driven a herd to town without being raided. The sun was westering as he crossed the street to Bennion's cubbyhole office. From the distance came the faint echo of the engine whistle hauling the trainload of cattle. The Rocker O

riders were moving specks on the plain eastward. Jud jerked open the office door, stepped in quickly.

Bennion, lounging with heels higher than his head, came upright in his swivel chair, pulling his feet off the desk. He barked, "Well?"

"It won't be well for you, Port," Jud said in a silky voice, "if you don't leave town by sundown. I'm onto your rustlin' game. If you don't believe it, listen: you're offerin' high prices for cattle, which you never expect to pay, so that the cowmen will throw bunches on the trail and make it fairly easy for Bart Jarvis's gang to grab 'em. They work over the brands, you take the critters off Bart's hands cheap, and everybody thinks it's Rocker O stuff you're shippin'."

BENNION, sticking thumbs in the armholes of his flowered vest, rocked gently in his chair. "If you believe what you're sayin', why not tell your sheriff brother and save his face?"

"I suspect Bart's told you why I'm layin' off him," replied Jud. "But I figure you put him up to this, and that, if you're got rid of, he'll quit because the outlet for rustled cows will be closed. He'd hardly dare risk dealin' with Ives & Odell. In about an hour, Bennion, it'll be sundown. Unless you're gone by then, I'll be comin' for you!"

The cattle buyer sneered. "I'd gamble with you, Folsom, if there was need of it. What excuse would you offer if you drilled me?"

"I'll think of somethin'—" Jud's brows drew together—"and you'd better be ready to shoot it out, come sundown, if you decide to stick!"

He wheeled and left the office, to take his stand in the saloon across the way. A half-hour went by and the cattle buyer hadn't appeared. The sun hung low in the sawtoothed hills westward when the door Jud was watching opened. Bennion came forth and started rapidly down the sidewalk. Jud stalked out of the saloon, into the street, following him.

"Here I am, Bennion!"

Bennion didn't look around. Folsom gained the sidewalk and overtook the cattle buyer. He shot a venomous glance at Jud, snarling:

"You won't dare pull 'nless I do! I'm goin' to the sheriff and see if peaceful citizens can be hounded by killers like you!"

"I'll make you fight, Bennion!" Jud grabbed him with one hand, swung him about, slapped his face hard, once, twice.

The cattle buyer stumbled off the sidewalk, his face aflame, so enraged by the lusty blows that he slapped leather. His gun was coming out before he recovered his balance. Jud's Colt leaped from holster to hand, jetting smoky flame. His bullet struck the reeling figure high in the shoulder, whirling Bennion half around as his thumb hit the hammer. With a ringing sound, the slug glanced from a lamppost. Bennion dropped his weapon and yelled for all the town to hear:

"You kill-crazy fool, the law'll settle with you for this!"

Jud couldn't finish him, unarmed as he was. Shouting citizens, who had seen him slap Bennion, began collecting out of gunshot. Young Folsom glanced down the street. His brother was leaving the jail on the run. Jud went the other way at a fast walk, broke into a run as Cal bellowed at him. Cal would have to lock him up if he didn't get out of Ocotillo in a hurry. And Jud had other plans since he had failed to drive out Bennion or kill him. As he ran toward the stable where he kept his horse, Jud cursed the man he was protecting, worthless Bart Jarvis.

Jud had never saddled a horse more speedily. He could tell by the tramp of feet how close the crowd was getting, led by his brother. Mounting, he roared down the runaway. Jack-knifed in the saddle, he sawed on the reins, turning west up the street, paying no heed to Cal's shout:

"Halt! You hear me, Jud! Halt!"

The sheriff's gun boomed, the shots going high. But Jud didn't halt. He rode like a streak, stopped only when he was far out in the brush, with the night shadows gathering about him friendly-wise. He off-saddled and squatted down to study the situation.

There was one thing left to do, as he saw it. Watch the drive trail to Ocotillo far another herd and destroy the raiders, all but Bart, when they tried to gather it in. Bart wouldn't find it easy to recruit another gang and he couldn't lift cattle without help. It was a large order, but Jud had got himself in a desperate fix. And his actions, being misunderstood,

would put his sheriff brother in a bad light.

Bennion's wound shouldn't prevent him from carrying on, but Jud had no notion which ranch the cattle buyer would visit next. He lived off the country for several days, hovering in the vicinity of the broad, hoof-marked trail used by the cattlemen of the district in driving herds to Ocotillo. Not once did he catch a glimpse of Port Bennion, though it was certain, on the fourth day of his vigil, that the cattle buyer had passed that way.

Just at sunset, Folsom spied the bannering dust of a trail herd. He expected the outfit to swing off and go into camp, for they were still half a day's journey from town. But evidently the drive boss was making a night march in the hope of eluding the rustlers.

IT HAD grown dark by the time the lead steers passed the spot where Jud Folsom lay hidden in the shinnery. From the high-pitched talk of swing riders, he identified the outfit as Ab Arbuckle's. Ab, lured by the price Bennion offered, was taking a chance with another bunch of beef.

When the drag of the herd had gone by, Jud stepped into leather. With his horse threading the shinnery at a walk, he kept looking over his shoulder for riders against the eastern skyline. Suddenly his mount snorted and sidestepped. Jud slung hand to scabbard, leaped down from the saddle as gun flame unraveled a few feet away. He'd ridden into the Rocker O crowd, bushed up at the trailside.

Doubtless they mistook him for an outrider of Arbuckle's. He answered the booming gun as he hit the ground. The thrashing about of a wounded man ensued. Other Colts opened up, and Jud hunkered down, matching them shot for shot for a feverish sixty seconds. All he could see were the luridly winking guns of the raiders.

A hard blow in the chest knocked him flat on his back. He was half conscious of a rush of hoofs past him. Other horses pelted into the shinnery from the trail, and there was a constant blare of guns. Trying to roll out of the way of a charging horse, Jud raised his voice in a feeble yell. The rider jerked his mount to one side and slid down. He poked a gun against the dim form on the ground, scratched a match on his chaps. Ab Arbuckle shouted in amazement:

"Here's one of 'em—the sheriff's brother, by ranny!"

His outfit came riding back. Jud, sick from his wound, waited in vain for them to discover dead Rocker O men lying about. Apparently he hadn't killed a single cow thief and those he bullet-branded had been able to ride. His horse was found and he was boosted astride, somehow clinging there while the drive continued on its way, arriving at Ocotillo in the small hours.

The sheriff was roused. Jud would never forget the look on Cal's face as two punchers held him upright before the sheriff's desk, while Ab Arbuckle profanely accused him of being with the bushup party.

"Kid," said Cal Folsom, "I never thought you'd come to this! But you've been mighty different lately. Who were the men with you?"

"I wasn't with them," denied Jud. "Ran into the gang in the brush. They hadn't jumped the Arbuckle herd yet. I was huntin' 'em, you see—"

"That's hogwash!" snarled Arbuckle. "If he gets away before his trial, Cal, we'll know it was because he's your brother and attend to you ourselves, star or no star!"

"He won't get away," the sheriff said quietly. "He'll be treated like any other owlhoot suspect. Right now he needs a doctor."

Jud's chest wound kept him on his back for two weeks. Cal prodded him for the names of the other rustlers, but all Jud would say was, "I was huntin', not ridin' with them waddies." Port Bennion didn't press his assault and battery charge, apparently being content to let matters stand as they were. It must have riled him when he couldn't avoid paying the high price he had offered Arbuckle for the second Leaning A herd.

ONE day, following Jud's recovery, Cal brought Nan Jarvis back to his brother's cell and left them alone to talk.

"How are you, Jud?" the girl asked anxiously. "This is the first I've been in town for weeks. They told me at the store you were in jail, charged with being a rustler." She glanced along the empty corridor, lowered her voice. "I know you're not, but I'm half frantic

about Bart. Several of his men have been laid up with bullet wounds and he won't answer my questions. If I can do anything to help you, Jud, if I must make a choice between an innocent man and one who's guilty—"

He squeezed the hand she had thrust through the cell door. "Don't make any such choice. I wouldn't want to be the cause of breakin' your heart, like you once said. There ain't enough evidence to hang me."

No new raids had been reported while Jud was convalescing, obviously due to the rustlers' disability from gunshot wounds. But along in the afternoon, the day after Nan's visit to the jail, a cattleman roared into the office with the tale of another trail raid. Jud, standing by his cell door, heard Cal assure the stockman that the rustlers would be caught before morning. Jud wondered if his brother really had a line on the thieves. Followed the sounds of the posse's hurried departure.

About ten o'clock that night, Jud was roused by horses stopping in front of the calaboose. Boots scuffed in the office, and Deputy Shayne growled, "You get the doc, Hank, while I'm peelin' off his clothes." Hank was the other deputy. Not hearing Cal's voice, Jud called his name.

"I figure he's got his death wound, Jud," Shayne answered gruffly.

Jud went cold all over. "Let me see him, Shayne."

The deputy came and unlocked the door of Jud's cell. He said they had been ambushed a mile from the Rocker O, driven back down the trail with Hank holding Cal in the saddle while Shayne did the shooting. "Cal kinda suspicioned it was the Jarvis outfit after old Tal's daughter came here yesterday. If you knew they were on the rustle and kept it quiet, account of the girl—well, was I in your boots, Jud, I'd feel mighty like I was to blame for Cal's death, if he dies."

By the lamp he held in his left hand, Shayne saw Jud grow pale. The cowboy didn't answer, he acted. As he hooked the gun from Shayne's holster, the deputy dropped the lamp, which smashed to atoms. But the pressure of the Colt against his ribs, clipped words from Jud's tense lips, warned the deputy not to gamble with him. The cell door closed on Shayne, and Jud ran into the office. His brother was stretched on the table he used for a desk, scarcely breathing.

Jud took one agonized look at Cal's face, then pelted outside to the hitch-rack. He mounted Cal's horse, spurred away, turning the nearest corner at a mad gallop. For Nan's sake he had protected her brother, even getting himself in a jackpot to save a renegade's neck. But when they cut down his own brother, sturdy arm of the law, with bushwhack

bullets, it was the last straw.

The sheriff's horse was tired, but Jud kept it hammering with spur and voice, all the way to the Rocker O. It crumpled and threw him as he rode through the gateway. Scrambling up, he limped on. The bunkhouse was dark, but the lighted windows of the ranch house showed that someone was up well past the usual bedtime.

Loud voices assailed Jud's ears as he went up the porch steps. He crept to a window and was a little disconcerted by what he saw and heard. Bart Jarvis, hand on gun, faced his rustler crew and Port Bennion the length of the room. Nan stood behind her brother, frightened eyes peering over his shoulder.

"For the last time, Bart," snarled the cattle buyer, "I'm tellin' you to turn that girl over to us. She ain't goin' to squeal and send me to the gallows!"

"Nor none of us!" barked Bib Taver.

THE wastrel Bart wore a dogged look such as Jud had never observed on his face before. "My answer is, you'll have to kill me first! I've been a no-good all my life, but when it comes to murderin' my sister—"

The door burst open and Jud bounced in, his Colt spitting flame. Port Bennion whirled with a stricken cry, his gun swinging up. Fire streaked from the muzzle, but he was going down and the bullet missed Folsom by a foot. Bart's .45 burst into a stuttering roar. One of the rustlers sank to the floor. Shots answered Jarvis, who bent from the middle. Taver had turned on Jud, rocking hammer spur.

Folsom blasted Bib, shifted aim to another smoke-wreathed waddy, and the pair of them reeled on rubbery legs, collapsing together. Down on his side, Bart had strength to lift his gun and trigger once before he fell on his face. The last cow thief, crouching among the huddled forms, keeled over with Bart's and Jud's bullets pouched in his vitals.

Nan, on her knees beside Bart, raised tear-wet face as Jud stepped over the forms nearest the door. "He's gone," she sobbed.

"It's better than the hangrope," Jud said grimly. "I did my best to rid him of bad company, so's he'd have to go straight. He repaid me by bushwhackin' my brother and his deputies. I reckon Cal's goin' to die—and I'm as much to blame as anyone."

Nan groped to her feet. "Don't say that, Jud. I was the cause of your holding your tongue. I told Bart I knew he was rustling, that I was going to tell everything, so that you would be released. The others overheard me. Bennion had come early in the evening, got all the men to ride down the road with him. I didn't know why. He must have known Cal was heading this way." She had reached Jud on unsteady feet, put both hands on his arm, her sorrowful eyes lifted to his set face. "Are you sure Cal will die?"

"Just breathin' when I left," said Jud. "I've got to have a fresh horse and get back to town. You're safe enough now."

"But I'm riding with you, Jud. I couldn't stand it here alone."

He rushed out to saddle horses for them both. She had turned out the living room lamps and changed to riding garb when he returned to the house. They talked but little, racing through the night, and tumbled from saddle by the jail as gray light streaked the eastern rim of prairie.

Cal had been put to bed, and the doctor met them with finger on lips. But Cal's voice rumbled, "Who is it?"

Jud tiptoed to the bedside, clinging to Nan's hand. He said, "Cal," and swallowed hard, unable to go on. But there was relief in his gaze. Cal looked too strong to die.

The sheriff glanced from one to the other, his eyes half lidded. "So that's the reason you covered up for the head rustler? It was Nan's brother. Well, I'd guessed it before we rode into that bushup. Don't tell me you cleaned 'em up by yourself, kid?"

"Bart helped at the last—he's dead," Nan choked. "I'm so very glad you aren't going to die, Cal. And please don't blame Jud for disloyalty. He did it for me."

"I'm not blamin' him." Sheriff Folsom smiled. "I'd say you were reason enough for any man to act a little cracked-brained. Jud's squared himself with the law by wipin' out that gang. But I'm advisin' him not to play fast-and-loose with it again. If there's to be a weddin', hold off till I'm on my feet again, will you? Speak up, Jud."

Happily Jud turned to Nan. "I haven't asked her, but I guess—"

"No guessing about it!" exclaimed Nan, rising on tiptoe to kiss him.

Kingpin of Boom Town

A true tale of the fabulous gold strikes made by a famous Western prospector.

By C. W. Chamberlain

PLAIN hell on earth aptly described the Bullfrog district in the Death Valley region of Nevada, where more than three million dollars in gold was taken from the mines in the first few months of 1905. That bonanza strike was the climax of a fabulous career, second to none in the West. It established a legend that had been long in the making and which has grown all out of proportion to the actual size of the man.

The loggers have their Paul Bunyan; the river men have their Mike Fink and John Henry; the muckers have their Matty Kiely. But not even the legendary Bunyan can boast of the prolific tales that have grown up around the pride and joy of the jackass men, or, more elegantly, the Western prospectors.

This idol of the desert rats and the mountain men was no mere figment of the imagination. Like Matty Kiely, he actually lived a long life and has a grave. He was a flesh and blood man but no huge giant of a hombre, for most prospectors, like their hardtails, were small and wiry. And Shorty Harris was the runtiest of all the men who spent their lives prospecting for gold.

No social outcast, as were many of his contemporaries, this five-foot, red-whiskered jasper was a man who lived robustly and uproariously in Western mining camps and in Eastern cities when the mood was on him. His heart was as big as his Stetson and his genial sociability stayed with him to the end. An unrivaled character who made history in mountain and desert, he, in his own opinion, was classified as a "single blanket, canteen, pick and jackass man."

Few of his worshipers know that his first name was Frank, or that he was born in Rhode Island, in 1857, of a Scotch mother and an Irish father. Nor do they care that he was an orphan at the age of seven and lived with an aunt until he was fourteen; ran away from this home and was illiterate to the end of his days.

Their idolatry is born of more important facts—that he discovered more strikes and prospected in more desolate places than any other man. Their interest in Shorty Harris has grown with the years as new facts and legends are presented about his unique personality, his wild adventures and unbelievable experiences, culminating in his burial in a grave lower than that of any other man in America and—standing up!

That he was the most monumental and joyous liar in Western history is mere detail. That it cost him about $40 every time he took a drink is merely color added to a starkly chromatic character who took on all the hues of the rainbow in an environment that often was drab, barren and desolate waste.

WHEN Shorty Harris ran away from his relative's home he began to work as a farmhand, but this was no life for a man of destiny. He floated to the big Eastern cities, lived and worked among the dead-end kids of those days and finally drifted west. Bumming his way to Dodge City, Kansas, he learned of the gold strikes farther west. He rode the rods to Yuma and was kicked off the train by an unfeeling brakeman, just before he crossed the line into California.

This experience struck a spark in the soul of a natural wit and humorist when he discovered that Yuma was celebrating—not his arrival, but some other event. Inquiring of a native about the flags, bunting and brass bands, he received the laconic answer:

"Just celebrating the giving back of all

the land to the Indians from who we stole it."

That sort of imagination and repartee became one of the two goals in a life that had been much too barren of humor and wealth. From that day on, Shorty began to indulge in robust wisecracks and lusty witticisms that led to his development as the Western champion of genial exaggeration.

As a matter of fact, the Yuma celebration was a welcome to President Grant whose train was passing through. Shorty became a passenger on that train by riding the rods into California.

From Los Angeles, he drifted back to a gold strike in Colorado and began to develop his second goal in life, that of finding a "lallapaloozer of a mine" and the keenest nose for gold in the world. He hung around the mines until he felt that he had learned his lesson and then drifted up into Montana. From 1877 on, Shorty visited various gold diggings in the Northwest, ending up again in California.

Seven years of drifting into and around a hundred mining camps finally took him into Nevada with a feeling that his destiny lay in the Panamints and Death Valley. Up to this time the little man had been a lone wolf, but now he took unto himself a pardner, John Lambert by name. This was the turning point in Shorty's life which had been more or less a hand-to-mouth existence.

At the age of thirty-five, on Saint Patrick's Day in 1892, Shorty and his pardner found the lallapaloozer and were on the road to becoming millionaires. The St. Patrick mine was a bonanza, but Shorty was no business man. He was satisfied to be a jackass prospector. Financing the Panamint diggings was beyond the little man's ability and when he was offered seven thousand dollars in cash for his share, he took it without question. Then he spent it in one rip-roaring heller of a celebration and went forth to find another lallapaloozer.

Shorty was a natural born desert rat and, with his jackass, he combed the mountains and sands of that desolate wilderness. He could go longer without water than any prospector in Nevada and could live on little or nothing. As a matter of fact, he was healthier and heartier when broke and trailing his hardtail than when he had money and spent it on liquor and women.

Probably no other prospector ever had so many ups and downs as Shorty Harris did. He could "smell" gold outcroppings across a valley. It was even said that Heliotrope, his jackass, had a nose for gold and could locate a bonanza while Harris slept.

BUT each lallapaloozer was sold for a song and Shorty sang many roundelays. With no business sense, the little prospector gladly threw off the responsibilities of management, took what was offered him, spent the money and sallied forth to find another strike.

It was after one of his celebrations that, with aching head and bleary eyes, he was following Heliotrope across the desert on another prospecting trip when he saw an astounding sight. It almost caused him to swear off from future celebrations.

On the distant horizon marched a huge, ungainly animal with a hump on its back. Shorty never had seen a camel and even if he had known what it was he wouldn't have believed that there would be one in this desolate country. As a matter of fact, it was one of the few survivors of the famous herd brought to this country from Africa, before the Civil War, by the Secretary of War, as a desert transportation experiment.

Shorty never had heard of the enterprise or that the camels had been left to shift for themselves when the plan failed. He rubbed his eyes and shook his splitting head to rid himself of the mirage or whatever it was. But the camel continued on its placid march along the horizon. The nose paint they sold jackass men these days wasn't what it should be. Maybe he had better quit the stuff and save his money.

That night, the little prospector camped in a valley, but he couldn't sleep. The memory of the strange vision would not down and he was looking forward without pleasure to a future career of painful sobriety.

A huge, crimson moon was rising behind a distant ridge as Shorty sat and puffed his pipe, ruefully contemplating the dismal years ahead. Suddenly a silhouette of the strange animal he had seen earlier passed before the glowing moon. The prospector shook himself and peered

at the disturbing sight as the beast disappeared over the ridge.

Curiosity became stronger than his fear and Shorty threw his gear on Heliotrope's back and proceeded to investigate. If the beast was real, he wanted to know it and pronto. The burro followed him over the ridge and the little man finally caught up with the camel. A closer view, and the fact that it was on this spot that Shorty found a rich outcropping, drove all ideas of future abstinence from his mind. The money from the sale of this lallapaloozer went just as fast and uproariously as had previous wealth.

Many tales have been told of Shorty's sweetheart, the Belle of Ballarat, who was a huge Amazon of a woman. When he proposed to her, Bessie Hart looked down from her great height of six-feet-four to the sawed-off jackass man and told him she was willing to be a sister to him, but that was all. Bessie was a blacksmith by trade and Shorty remained true to her memory.

IN 1904, Harris made the all-time strike of his checkered career. With a new pardner, E. L. Cross, he was prospecting in the Bullfrog Hills when they found what is known as the bonanza sensation of the Southwest, "just this side of hell."

The ghost town of Rhyolite is about all that remains today, but a railroad was built to the spot and the town had a population of 12,000 not long after Shorty's discovery. It was another lallapaloozer. Shorty sold out immediately for $800 and his pardner sold out later for $60,000. Shorty was a jackass man, not a financier.

A year later, Harris and another pardner, Peter Auguerreberry, were on their way to Ballarat where Shorty had a tentative date with his Amazon. Five thousand feet above Death Valley is a monument to him, a ghost town known as Harrisburg. Scotty took $10,000 as his share of the claim they discovered. Before the money was spent the cumulative effect of the little jackass man's many strikes had made him famous.

He traveled a riotous route to the metropolitan cities of the East where he was acclaimed a mystic, a seer, a psychic geologist and what-not. Every time he entered a bar, he found he had more friends than an Indian's dog has fleas. He bought drinks for the house at $40 a throw. He passed out advice to all and sundry, never losing his sense of humor, and telling tall tales that got the front page as gospel truth in the newspapers from Kansas City to New York.

When he returned to the West, broke, he hunted up Heliotrope and started out again. But everywhere he went he was followed by the greedy, the gullible and the gregarious. He entertained them with fantastic stories while he posed as an omniscient authority on geological mysticism. He found more gold and directed others to more or less lucky strikes.

By 1915 he was a lengendary, ghostly figure in the ghost town of Ballarat. Waiting for Bessie Hart, who never came, Shorty Harris died in 1934 at the age of seventy-seven. He asked to be buried in the lowest spot in Death Valley, which is the hottest.

The grave diggers made the hole to fit the Shorty they knew, and it wasn't large enough for the standard-size coffin that he occupied. It was too hot to enlarge the grave and they planted the casket on end so that the little man is standing up today. The Pacific Borax Company supplied the monument over this lowest grave on the American continent, 280 feet below sea level. Shorty would have liked that.

Sunset for Red Hell

Exciting Novelette

The old man pitched forward, blood streaming from his chest.

I

LIKE an unseen shadow, fear walked the streets of Dawsonville beside the townspeople. Vince Elgin, waiting beside the stage for his suitcase, saw that fear in the chill set of their faces, in the hostile glances they gave him. There had been a dozen men loitering in front of the hotel when the stage wheeled in. He had stepped down, and when they had taken time to study him, suspicion spread among them like a contagion.

The crowd melted away, fear prodding them into an undignified haste. Vince noted it, and paid no more attention to it. He had no time to worry about other people's problems. His own was big enough. He had come here to find his best friend who by this time might be dead.

Vince registered at the hotel, carried his valise to his room, and returned to the desk. Andy Dawson was the man he wanted to find, but in this case the indirect route was probably the best one, so he said casually, "I've heard Red Hell Dawson is the biggest sheepman in Oregon."

The clerk fiddled with a pencil, eyeing Vince closely, and then moved along the desk to a cigar box. He flipped the lid

Dawson

By Wayne D. Overholser

Vince Elgin's best pard had entered the ranch house of Red Hell Dawson, never to be seen again. And when Vince sought to probe the mystery of the missing man, he himself became a coffin candidate.

back and stood there, still watching Vince. He saw a man not yet thirty, medium tall and a little on the chunky side, with a pug nose, mild blue eyes that weren't exactly mild now, and corn-colored hair topped by a derby.

"You don't look like I figured Walt Welcome looked," the clerk said finally, "but sometimes hardcases like Welcome don't look like you expect 'em."

"My name's Elgin." Vince jerked a thumb at the register.

"Welcome wouldn't sign his own name," the clerk said. "You notice how the fellers outside took off when they saw you?"

"Who the hell is Walt Welcome?"

"A tough hand most folks hereabouts expect to show up 'most any time." The clerk bit off the end of his cigar, a speculative gleam in his eyes. "You was asking about Red Hell. You won't be able to see him if that was what you figured on. He's a sick man, or so Lafe Naylor says. That's his nephew."

"Where does he live?"

"Big white house on the hill. If you want to ask anything about Red, you stop at the little house in the corner of the yard. That's where Sam Paris and his girl Winnie live. You won't have no trouble if you stop there."

"What kind of trouble would I run into if I went on to the big house?"

The clerk shrugged. "Mebbe a slug in the brisket. Naylor is purty tough. He's got a feller there he calls a medico, another galoot who's supposed to be a nurse, and another one or two who look to me like gunslingers. Stay away, Mister."

ANDY was old Red Hell's nephew, but Vince had never heard Andy speak of a cousin named Lafe Naylor. He had gathered that Andy had relatives both Andy and Red Hell would just as soon forget, and likely Naylor was one of them. Vince nodded, said, "Thanks," and turned away.

"Wait a minute," the clerk called. "Don't be a fool. Naylor won't let nobody see Red, not even his best friends like Sam Paris. He claims a commotion would kill Red, so he keeps him quiet."

A frosty grin crinkled Vince's face. "I'm a little tough myself, friend."

"You'll get yourself killed," the clerk said testily, "or mebbe you'll just disappear like a feller done who registered here a couple weeks ago."

Vince had reached the door. He paused there, not letting the concern show in his face that the clerk's words brought to him. He asked, "What did this jigger look like? The one who disappeared."

Caution came to the clerk then. He said carefully, "I don't remember."

"Thanks," Vince said again, and left the hotel.

Andy Dawson was a lawyer who had his office in the same building that housed Vince's print shop. Their friendship was the kind that comes to men who have stood side by side fighting a common foe with flaming six-guns in their hands, a friendship that had caused Vince to suffer the agonies of the damned from the day Andy had come into his office more than two weeks ago, a letter in his hand.

"I'm going to Dawsonville," Andy had said, his face gray with worry. "Something's wrong. I don't know what it is, but I'm going to find out. This letter was missent in the mail, so it's late getting to me. Old Red's been mighty good to me, so I've got to go. I've never been in Dawsonville, but if I'm lucky I'll see it in a day or two." He'd held out his hand then, and Vince had gripped it, and Andy had added, "If I don't see you again, Vince, well, we've sure had some good times."

"You act like you're on a secret mission for the king of Bullramia."

"Just my own secret mission. I expect to be back in a week."

Vince had waited two weeks, torn between the fear that something had happened to Andy and the knowledge that Andy would resent him butting into a family trouble. Now, as Vince turned toward the Paris cottage in the corner of Dawson's yard, he condemned himself for a fool because he'd waited two weeks. It was just a guess, but he had a hunch that the man who had disappeared was Andy Dawson, a thought that brought a sickening knot to his stomach muscles.

A girl opened the door of the cottage when Vince knocked, a pretty, brown-eyed girl with black, glossy hair and a red-lipped mouth that held no smile for him. Hostility was stamped upon her face, and when Vince said, "I'd like to talk to Sam Paris," the hostility deepened.

"He isn't here."

The girl started to shut the door, but couldn't because Vince's toe was in the way. He asked, "You're Winnie Paris?"

"Yes, but I don't want to buy any sheep dip or lightning rods or anything else."

"I'm not selling anything. All I want to do is talk."

"It's a dangerous pastime. Get out." The girl pressed the door against Vince's foot.

"I want to see Red Hell Dawson," Vince said doggedly. "I thought—"

"He lives in the big house." She motioned toward it. "Go on up there and see what happens to you. Lafe Naylor won't want to see Walt Welcome either."

"I'm not Walt Welcome," Vince said irritably.

"You're lying," the girl said witheringly. "You've been a troublemaker all your life, and now with your uncle on his deathbed, you have to come back and make some more."

"If you'll ease that door off my foot, I'll be going."

"Glad to." She released her pressure for a second, and the instant Vince's foot was out of the way, she slammed the door and locked it.

VINCE grinned wryly, and turned toward the big house. He had covered less than half the distance to it when a man stepped out, a Winchester cradled across his arm. He called, "Walk the other way, Mister." When Vince came on, he raised the gun to his hip, thumbed back the hammer, and repeated sharply, "Walk the other way."

This would be Lafe Naylor, Vince guessed, and judging from his looks, he'd be tough enough. He was a big man with stringy hair, a long, drooping mustache, and a pair of tiny, bloodshot eyes set close astride a saber-sharp nose.

"I want to see Red Hell Dawson," Vince said, and still didn't stop.

It was then a gun spoke from the doorway behind Naylor, the bullet drilling a hole in the top of Vince's derby. He stopped, and said softly, "You boys play rough."

"Red's a sick old man," Naylor said. "We don't let him be disturbed by no visitors."

"You're Lafe Naylor?"

"Yeah, I'm Naylor. I'm Red's nephew. What'd you want to see Red for?"

"Just to talk. My name's Vince Elgin. I knew a friend of Red's in Nevada where I live, and since I happened to be in town, I thought I'd look him up."

"He's too sick to talk," Naylor growled. "Vamoose."

A man had come from the house to stand beside Naylor, and Vince, taking one look at him, pegged him for a killer. He was a lanky, long-fingered man with a great beak of a nose and light blue eyes that were cold and merciless. A Colt was clutched in his right hand; another rode in a holster on his left hip. He said ominously, "Get this jigger out of here, Lafe, or I'll put another slug a little lower than I did the first one."

Vince, seeing the vicious, killer light in the man's blue eyes, knew that nothing would be gained by staying to argue. He wheeled, and went back across the yard. As he opened the gate and let himself out, he saw that Naylor and the gunman had gone into the house. This Dawsonville, Vince thought, was a suspicious and hostile town. There must be somebody here who was not afraid of Walt Welcome and of Lafe Naylor and his tough crew, somebody who could tell him why Naylor would allow no one to come into the house to see Red Hell Dawson. His job was to find that somebody.

Vince cruised along one side of Dawsonville's Main Street, and then the other. He found the sheriff's office, but it was deserted. He came back to the hotel, feeling men's eyes upon him as he walked the street, and sensing the hate and fear they held for him.

Vince asked at the desk, "Who's the sheriff?"

"Mark Bascom. He ain't in town right now, but he oughta be back by dark."

"Tell him I want to see him," Vince said curtly, and went on up the stairs to his room. There he paused, hand on the knob. If it had been Andy who had disappeared from the hotel, why had he stayed here instead of going to Red Hell's house? The clerk was scared of somebody, probably Lafe Naylor; scared enough that he hadn't wanted to remember what the man looked like. It was time, Vince thought savagely, to do a little scaring himself.

Vince went back to the hotel, drew his gun, and lined it on the clerk's middle. The clerk swallowed, looked at the window as if hopeful the sheriff might be arriving at that opportune moment. He brought his gaze back to Vince, swallowed again, and whispered, "Is this a holdup?"

"No," Vince said softly. "I just want you to get a good look at this iron. Then decide whether you're going to talk to me or not. While ago your memory was pretty bad."

II

THE clerk chewed on his lower lip. His forehead was furrowed in the manner of one who is making a hard decision. Vince, remembering Lafe Naylor and the gunman, could understand the clerk's difficulty. Finally the clerk asked, "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know about this man who disappeared."

"Before he registered, he came in here and asked where Red Hell's house was. Then he lugged his valise up there. Purty soon he came back and got a room. Signed his name as Andy Dawson. It's the same room you've got, Mister. That's all we saw of him. He just naturally evaporated out o' that room sometime that night."

"What did he look like?"

"I told you I couldn't recollect. That was about two weeks ago, and I only saw him them two times."

Perhaps he was lying. Perhaps not. Vince stood studying the man for a time, and then slipped his gun back into his holster. He said, "All right," and went up the stairs again and into his room. The moment he stepped through the doorway he caught the smell of cigarette smoke. He plucked gun, closed the door and looked around. There was nobody else in the room, but he did see a note on the bureau, weighted down with a .45 cartridge. The scrawled words were hard to read, but there was no doubt about the meaning. The note read:

Stay in this room tonight. Leave town on the morning stage. If you stay, stop in at the furniture store and pick out a coffin. You'll need it.

Vince crumpled the note and put it in his pocket. If this was a joke, it was a poor one. He sat down on the bed, rolled a smoke, and thought about the mess he'd got himself into. If the man who had disappeared was Andy Dawson, the chances were good he was dead. That being true, Vince might as well pull out for Nevada in the morning. On the other hand, it might not be true, and Vince wasn't leaving until he knew. The only way to find out was to get into Red Hell Dawson's house. When he made the try, he'd need one of the furniture store's coffins if he didn't think of something better than he had.

Vince moved to the window, and saw that his room faced the alley behind the hotel. His window had no lock, and was directly over the roof of a lean-to. It would be a simple matter to get into the room from the lean-to roof Or a simpler task to come through the door. Vince hadn't locked it, and if he had, anybody could have broken it open. Possibly it was the clerk who had left the note. Immediately Vince dismissed the notion. Likely it was one of Lafe Naylor's men, but why should Naylor be suspicious of him, or fear him enough to try scaring him out of town?

At the moment Vince had more questions than answers. If he could have read the letter Andy had received from Red Hell, he might have a few more answers. He wasn't sure of that, either. Andy hadn't acted as if he knew much about it himself, but there had been enough in the letter to bring him here to Dawsonville. He'd expected trouble, and he'd found it. It seemed to Vince, as he thought about it now, that Andy might be a pawn in a very large game. Perhaps he'd stumbled into something he hadn't expected, had been murdered by Lafe Naylor. If so, Naylor wouldn't want a stranger stirring things up.

He could sit here all night, Vince thought bitterly, and ask himself questions that he couldn't answer. He had expected to see Red Hell, and find out from him what had happened to Andy. Having failed in that, he had no plan. Sam Paris might be able to tell him something, but judging by the way Winnie had received him, he probably wouldn't get a chance to talk to Sam. The best thing, he decided, was to wait for Lafe Naylor or whoever had written the warning note to show his hand.

Vince ate supper in the hotel dining room, walked by the sheriff's office. Finding that the lawman hadn't come back yet, he dropped into the Sheepman's Bar for a drink. He asked the barman, "Have you seen the sheriff today?"

"Not since morning."

"When you see him tell him I'm looking for him," Vince said. "The name's Elgin. He can find me at the hotel."

A FEELING of utter frustration was in Vince when he returned to his hotel room, put his gun under his pillow, and went to bed. For hours he rolled, kicked the blanket into a tangle around his feet, and pulled it up again. He'd been a fool for waiting two weeks. Andy

Dawson, as long as Vince had known him, had been the independent sort who was more willing to give help than receive it.

On at least two occasions Vince owed his life directly to Andy's quick thinking and fast trigger finger. Now he'd had a chance to pay Andy back, and he'd bungled it. He'd done everything wrong so far, and if Sam Paris or the sheriff didn't give him a clue to work on tomorrow, he'd wind up with everything still wrong.

It was after midnight before Vince went to sleep. It seemed about five seconds later that he was awakened by a thunderous pounding on his door. He palmed his gun and asked, "Who's there?"

"Mark Bascom, the sheriff. Don't try anything rough, Mister, or you'll get a little rough treatment yourself."

It was a trap. That was the thought in Vince's mind as he lighted the lamp and pulled on his pants. With his gun in his hand again, he opened the door. He found himself staring into the muzzle of a cocked Colt. He said with a coolness he didn't feel, "Shall we shoot each other now, sheriff, or later?"

"You're comical, ain't you?" the lawman growled. He was a stocky man with gray eyes and the weather-beaten look of one who wears out the seat of his pants on a saddle instead of a swivel chair. He stood in silence for a moment studying Vince. Then he said, "Winnie Paris thinks you're Walt Welcome."

It was a statement of what Winnie thought, and not what the sheriff thought. Vince pegged the lawman for an honest man. Perhaps not too bright, but honest. He knew he was taking a chance, but it seemed the best thing to do. He stepped back and laid his gun on the bureau top.

"Come in, sheriff," he said. "I had a little trouble with Lafe Naylor today, and when I got back to this room I found a note telling me to drift in the morning. I thought you were one of Naylor's trigger boys doing the chore for him a little early."

Bascom came in, still holding his gun, and still watchful. He said sourly, "A lot of folks have thought some funny things about me, but nobody ever figgered I was one of Naylor's outfit. Lemme see that note." Vince handed it to him, and after a moment's inspection, the lawman returned it, and shook his head. "Don't tell me nothing. I don't know what kind of handwriting them jiggers staying in Red Hell's house have."

Vince put the note back in his pocket. He said, "Now just who is this Welcome?"

"If you're Welcome, you're cool as all hell," Bascom said as if he couldn't quite make up his own mind.

"Who is he?" Vince demanded impatiently.

"He's another one of Red Hell's nephews," the lawman said. "The tough one. A dozen states would auger about which one would get the privilege of hanging him. If he shows up in Dawsonville, I'll clap him into jail on general principles, which same I've got a good notion to do to you."

"Go ahead," Vince said coolly. "You'll have a mighty red face when you find out who I am."

"There's two reasons why I'm not jailing you," Bascom said. "It wouldn't be like Walt Welcome to come to a hotel and take a room. He'd skulk around in the sagebrush until he got a chance to do the job he was figgering on. The other reason is that both the hotel clerk and the barkeep in the Sheepman's Bar told me you wanted to see me. It wouldn't be like Walt to want to see a sheriff."

"Fine," Vince said. "Now maybe you'd like to answer some questions about what's going on in Red Hell Dawson's house."

"Nope," Bascom said curtly. "First place I don't know, and second place I ain't sure you're here for any good. We've had a peck of trouble here lately. I don't mind a first-class bank robbing job where you can get on a horse and ride to beat hell after the gents that did it, but this thing has got me worked up into a lather because I don't know whether there's been any crime committed or not."

"LET'S go up to Dawson's house and look around," Vince suggested.

Bascom snorted. "What would Naylor be doing besides filling us full of lead?"

"Then get a posse and bust in."

"When I don't have a real reason to know anything's wrong? No, I can't do a damned thing but wish I knew what had happened to Red Hell, and likewise what had happened to the gent that disappeared out o' this here room two weeks ago."

"The clerk told me this jasper who disappeared was Andy Dawson," Vince said casually, watching the sheriff's face closely.

"That's how he signed his name on the hotel register, but it don't prove he's really Andy Dawson."

"You know anything about Andy Dawson?"

"I've heard Red Hell talk about him. Red's got three nephews, and that's all the heirs he has got. Andy was the only one he liked. Lafe Naylor says Red's about to die, which same means there's gonna be a big chunk of cash divided three ways, only Welcome's gonna have a hard time getting it and keeping his neck from getting stretched.

"Now mebbe you're Welcome, or mebbe you're this Andy who sent another hombre ahead of him to look the situation over. Nobody around here could identify Andy but old Red hisself, and nobody would know Welcome besides Red and Sam Paris. Or mebbe Naylor would. Now do you want to talk, Mister?"

"No," Vince snapped. "Not till I know you're on the level."

"Why, you lame-brained, pigheaded pieface," Bascom howled, "why shouldn't I be on the level?"

"Lafe Naylor might slip you a nice chunk of dinero to keep Walt Welcome and Andy Dawson from showing up."

"Which is the sort of notion Walt Welcome might get." Bascom picked Vince's gun up, and slipped it into his waistband. "Get on the rest of your clothes, and don't get smart, or I'll drill you just on the general idea that you might be Welcome. We're going over to see Sam Paris. . . ."

It was a dark night with only a thin starlight to brighten the dark earth. Bascom kept Vince in front of him all the way to the Paris house, the hard muzzle of his Colt prodding Vince in the back. Once Vince said, "Bascom, you may be straight, but you're sure as hell a fool. I wanted to work with you and not against you on this business, but that gun kicking me in the vertebrae doesn't make me feel like doing anything but turning around and kicking you in the teeth."

"Try it, son, and you'll get your teeth kicked out by lead," Bascom growled.

There were lights in both Red Hell's big house and the cottage where Sam Paris and his daughter Winnie lived. Once, as they were coming through the gate, Vince stopped. He breathed, "I had a notion we were being followed, Bascom."

"Go on," the sheriff snapped. "There's no reason for anybody to follow us. If you ain't Welcome, you've got nothing to worry about. Git along and don't make a fuss."

There might be plenty of reason, Vince was thinking as he went on to the Paris cottage, for somebody to follow them. If Red Hell's fortune was the cause of the trouble, a man like Lafe Naylor would go the whole way to keep Walt Welcome and Andy Dawson from putting in an appearance and claiming their third.

Winnie opened the door in answer to Bascom's knock. She said, "Come in," and stepped aside. Vince moved past her and on into the middle of the room. Sam Paris got up from his chair, and stood motionless for a long minute as he fixed his eyes on Vince. Bascom had come in and stood with his back to the door, the gun still in his hands.

"Seems that I'm exhibit A," Vince said. "Mr. Paris, I'd like to speak to you about your daughter. She was downright unfriendly this afternoon when I came to see you."

III

SAM PARIS was a tall, bony man with iron gray hair and beard and sharp eyes that seemed to be trying to see Vince and at the same time see in his mind the outlaw they called Walt Welcome. He smiled a little now as he turned and went back to his chair.

"You can put that iron up, Mark. This ain't Walt Welcome. And about my daughter." His smile widened as he reached for his pipe. "She's just downright ornery sometimes. Got her disposition from Grandma Eve, I reckon. She had her head so set on the notion that any stranger who'd be interested in me or Red Hell would be Walt Welcome that she couldn't believe nothing else."

"How do you know he isn't Welcome?" Winnie asked.

"I haven't seen Welcome in twenty years." Paris dribbled tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "A feller is bound to change some in that time, but there's ways he don't. Walt Welcome was a tall, skinny kid the way I remember him, and he had a devil's meanness in his eyes the first time I seen him. This jasper ain't got nothing like that. Looks like he might be

a purty good hombre when you got to know him."

"A man wouldn't look so tall when he got older," Winnie argued, "and wasn't skinny."

"Sure." Paris struck a match and held the flame to his pipe bowl. "Likewise Welcome had long fingers. This jasper's fingers are short and pudgy. Another thing is that Welcome had a long nose. Regular beak on him, and this feller's nose is flat like mebbe he got whacked there when he was a kid."

Vince grinned at the girl. "I'll bet you're sorry you shoved the door so hard against my foot."

"No," she flashed. "You had no business sticking it in there."

Paris chuckled. "She's just mad 'cause she made a mistake. Put your iron up, Mark. Let's find out why this hombre wanted to see me and Red Hell."

"I'm ready to listen," Bascom said.

"You'd better listen," Vince said, "because I think I know where Walt Welcome is, but I don't feel like talking as long as you've got that iron pointed in my direction."

Bascom jammed his Colt back into leather. "Go ahead," he growled.

Vince told them what had happened when he had gone to Red Hell's house that afternoon, and about the long-nosed gunman who had shot at him. He finished with, "Andy Dawson is my best friend. He got a letter over two weeks ago that had been missent, and was slow getting to Andy. He didn't tell me much about what was in it, but it was enough to bring him high-tailing up here. He expected trouble, and when he didn't show up after two weeks, I thought I'd better find out what had happened to him." Vince pinned his gaze on Bascom. "If Andy was the man taken out of the hotel, you've probably got a murder to solve."

Suspicion was still in Mark Bascom. "Mebbeso that's Walt Welcome in the big house. Mebbe not. I've seen that hombre, but didn't figger he was Welcome just because he had a long nose."

"How did Naylor happen to come here?" Vince asked.

"It started six, seven weeks ago." Sam Paris knocked the dottle from his pipe and slipped it back into his pocket. "Red was feeling purty puny. Doc told him he wasn't gonna live long, so he got the notion he wanted to see all three of his nephews before he cashed in. He sent 'em letters, but he told Andy to stay away until Walt Welcome and Lafe Naylor had showed up and gone.

"Andy must have figgered them two buzzards would be up to something, and came on regardless. Meanwhile Naylor moved in with these tough hands, and said he'd take care of Red from then on. I reckon this long-nosed hombre sneaked in sometime when nobody was looking. He's kept under cover when I was around, so I haven't seen him."

"You knew Welcome and Naylor before?" Vince asked.

Paris nodded. "I'm the only one left of the herders Red Hell brought with him when he came into this country years ago. Naylor and Welcome were both with him then. Just kids, and nothing alike. Naylor was yellow. Always has been and I reckon always will."

"He talks tough enough now," Vince said.

Paris snorted. "Yeah, with a pack of tough hands to back him up. Personally, I'm betting he's still yellow, but Walt wasn't. Tough and fast with a gun. Plumb mean. The upshot of it was Naylor found the country too much for him, so he drifted. Walt shot a man and had to git. They've never been back, neither of them, but they've written to Red right along. I suppose they've been figgering on getting their slice of Red's dinero, and when Andy showed up mebbe Naylor or Welcome got the idea they'd better split it two ways."

Vince wheeled to face Bascom. "Give me my gun. I can't see that you've done much to find out what happened to Andy. I'm going into the big house. If Andy's there, I'll find him. If he isn't, I'll get out of Naylor what happened to him."

"And get yourself blowed to hell." Bascom handed Vince his gun.

"A cautious hombre, this Bascom," Paris murmured.

"You ain't no hero yourself," Bascom snarled.

PARIS gestured wearily. "We're all a mite proddy, I reckon. You see, Elgin, we ain't been able to see Red since Naylor moved in, and we're all worried about him."

"I thought you were running Red's business," Vince said.

"I am," Paris agreed, "and I'll keep on running it the way Red wants it run. Naylor's been mighty sore because I

wouldn't sell the sheep and give him the cash. He claims Red wants to put everything into cash so he can divide it between the nephews."

Vince saw it then, clearly and sharply in that quick flash of intuition which came to him. Walt Welcome was hiding out in the big house. Lafe Naylor was his front, and Naylor was trying to convert Red Hell Dawson's fortune into cash money that Welcome could use. It was the sort of thing a man like Naylor would do with Welcome's gun in his back. Meanwhile Red and Andy were either dead or facing death as soon as Welcome's scheme materialized.

"I'm going in," Vince said. "If you hear some shooting, you'd better give me a hand, Bascom."

It was then Vince saw the sudden terror come into Sam Paris's face. His eyes were glued on the window behind Vance. He tried to say something, but no words came. Vince wheeled toward the window, drawing gun as he turned. He glimpsed the face of a masked man.

In that instant the man outside fired. Vince felt the breath of the bullet as he laced a shot through the already shattered window. It was too late. The man was gone. Then he heard Winnie cry out. Spinning back to face Sam Paris again, he saw the old man pitch forward on his face, blood flowing from him and making a dark pattern on the floor.

Vince was the first to reach the fallen man. The bullet had torn through his chest, but too high to be a fatal wound.

"I'll get the doctor," Winnie said, and ran out of the house.

"We'll take him into that room." Bascom nodded at the door behind Vince. "This is mighty funny business. No reason why anybody around here would want to kill Sam."

The medico was there sooner than Vince had expected. While he was examining Paris, Vince drew Winnie from the room. He said, "I'll need your help if I'm going to bust into the big house. Do I get it?"

"Anything I can do," the girl said. She picked up the lamp, and led the way into the kitchen. "The only way you can get in is through the basement. There is a front door and a back one, but they'll be locked. Naylor keeps a guard around the house, but if you're lucky you can get in while he's on the other side."

"What's in the basement?"

"It's probably empty now. Just a minute." Winnie stepped back to the porch and returned with a hammer. She handed it to Vince. "The best way to get in is through a basement window on the north side. Naylor boarded it up so you'll have to rip them off. Red's bedroom is upstairs, first door at the head of the stairs."

"Did Red live alone before Naylor showed up?"

"He kept a China cook boy," Winnie answered.

"Anybody seen him?"

"Not since Naylor moved in."

"Now about your help." Vince looked at the girl, hesitating as if not sure whether he should say this. "I—well, I've got to ask you to help me. Andy means as much to me as a brother would. Maybe this is a fool play, but I've got to make the try the same as he'd do for me. Either I'll get Andy out of there alive or I'll square up for his death."

"We all feel the same way about Red," Winnie said soberly. "He's made this town, and there isn't one of us here who doesn't owe him a great deal. The men would have gone in after him regardless of the sheriff's legal scruples if Naylor hadn't said a lot about Red being so sick that any kind of commotion would kill him. We didn't dream that Welcome was in the house, and we didn't think that Naylor would really harm Red. We've all expected Welcome to show up, so it was natural that we thought you might be him. Now what do you want me to do?"

"I'll make a lot of racket getting those boards off the window. I thought if you'd go around to the other side of the house and fire a few shots, it would cover the rumpus I was making and give those hombres something to think about."

"Of course I'll do it," Winnie said.

"Give me half an hour, and after you get done don't wait for some of Naylor's bunch to find you." Vince winked at the girl as if he were going on any casual errand, and left the cottage.

IT TOOK Vince much of the half hour to work his way along the back of Red Hell Dawson's big yard. There was a light burning in a front corner room, but the back of the house was in complete darkness. Naylor likely kept the light burning all night, and one or more men

patrolling the yard to prevent the very thing Vince was doing.

Vince, sizing it up that way, stopped often to listen, and when he did reach the north wall, he immediately froze against it. A man had come around the corner of the building. He stood for a moment as if listening, and then came on toward Vince. Again he paused, not more than ten feet from where Vince stood.

Vince had no way of knowing who the man was, or whether he suspected another's presence. There was only the faintest shadow in the black night, the pale blob of his face. Then a match flame raveled up into the darkness and was touched to a cigarette. In that moment Vince made out the features of a bronzed, square-faced man; one he had not seen.

The man stood smoking until a gun took up its thunderous chant from the other side of the house. The man cursed softly, and came running toward Vince. He let the fellow go past one full step; then leaped after him, left arm curling around the man's neck and tightening on his throat so that only a faint gurgle came from him. Vince hit him on the head with the hammer. It was not a hard blow, but hard enough to drive consciousness from him.

Vince eased the limp body to the ground. Quickly he searched along the wall until he found the window. He ripped off one board after another, kicked out the panes of glass, and slid through into the basement. His job now was to find Red Hell or Andy before Naylor's men got back from investigating the shooting. Or, better yet, he might find Naylor alone and get the truth out of him before his outfit came back.

Striking a match, Vince saw, in the thin light, a stairs in the middle of the basement. He climbed them, pushed open a door, and stepped into a dimly lighted hall. He palmed gun, and went the length of the hall and on into the parlor. He saw no one and he heard nothing. It had been easy. Too easy. Naylor himself should be in the house even if all of his men were outside.

Vince went up the stairs, paused to look the length of the long hall and to listen, but again saw no one and heard nothing that indicated human presence. It didn't make sense, unless, and the thought drove its chill blade into him, both Red Hell and Andy were dead. Then there would be no reason for Naylor to keep a guard inside the house.

It was that thought which drove Vince toward the door of Red Hell's room, a thought that hurried him into foolish and careless haste. He turned the knob, shoved the door open, and came in, cocked gun sweeping the room. He glimpsed the long-beaked, evil face of the man he thought was Walt Welcome, tried to whirl and drive a slug into him, and could not turn fast enough. A gun barrel arced down with evil intent, rapping him across the head and sending him toppling forward into a pit that was black and bottomless.

Vince was back in the basement when he came to. He sat up and rubbed his aching head. Slowly the nausea passed. The floor, the table, the lamp on the table; all stopped their convolutions and fell into their proper places. It was then Vince saw where he was and became aware of the half circle of men, their expectant grins, their evil faces fastened on him like a pack of wolves waiting for a signal to close in.

"'Bout time you're waking up." It was the long-nosed man standing on the other side of the table from Vince, thumbs hooked in gunbelt, his bony sinister face set in the hard, brutal lines of one who had played a long and patient game, and now has no intention of letting anything nor anybody thwart him.

IV

SLOWLY Vince's eyes moved around the half circle of men. Lafe Naylor stood at the end, not looking nearly as tough as when he had stopped Vince in front of the house with a Winchester in his hands. He was scared, Vince thought, and he wondered why. A bearded man stood beside Naylor. Welcome was next, then the square-faced guard Vince had slugged before he'd broken into the basement, and finally a bullet-headed, black-eyed man.

"You're Walt Welcome?" Vince asked the long-nosed man.

"I'm Welcome. Now I want to know who you are, and why you're fool enough to bust in here?"

"I told you my name's Vince Elgin." He got to his feet, swayed uncertainly, and caught the edge of the table. "I wanted to see Red Hell Dawson."

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"He's sick. You was told that, too, but still you had to come prying boards off a window and sticking your nose into business that was none of yours. I'm asking you why, and you'd better talk fast."

Vince nodded at Naylor. "I thought you were running this show, Naylor?"

Welcome snickered. "Lafe's a right handy hombre, Elgin, but it's me who calls the tune. You ready to answer?"

"I've got nothing more to say." Vince shook his head wearily. "Except that maybe Red Hell's sick enough to be dead."

"Not yet." Welcome winked at the square-faced man who stood beside him. Red ain't half as dead as you're gonna be. That right, Moon?"

The square-faced man rubbed the top of his head and cursed. "Y-ou're gonna be plumb sorry you cracked me on the noggin, Elgin. I'm the gent who gets the chore of dropping you—"

"Hold on, Moon," Welcome broke in. "This jigger hasn't talked, and we may have to cut him up a mite to get him to. He isn't so worried about Red. He's got something bitin' him."

"He told me this afternoon he came from Nevada," Naylor said.

"Yeah, I remember that." A sly grin came to Welcome's thin lips. "I'm likewise remembering that Andy came from Nevada. Now mebbe Andy said for you to come snorting up here if he didn't get back in a week or two. You thought you'd cut yourself a nice slice of gravy, did you, Elgin?"

"Andy didn't tell me to come up here," Vince said savagely, knowing he was saying the wrong thing and still letting himself be prodded into saying it. "I knew Andy came up here, and I knew likewise he hadn't come back. I came up here to see what had happened to him."

Welcome drew tobacco and paper from his pocket and began to roll a smoke, the sly grin not leaving his face. He said, "I figgered that was it. It won't do you any good, friend."

"Andy's alive?" Vince made himself ask the question, and forgot to breathe while he waited for the answer.

"Yeah, he's alive." Welcome struck a match and brought the flame to his cigarette. He stood grinning at Vince, the cigarette drooping from a corner of his mouth. "He won't be alive much longer." He shot a malicious glance at Naylor. "We're just about done with our cousin."

"You're a stupid, killing fool," Vince said savagely. "You'll stretch rope, the lot of you."

"They won't hang a man for murder when they don't find a body, and Mister, we've got a place to leave some bodies where they won't never find them. Yours and Andy's and Red's. You'll be right beside the China boy cook. By this time I reckon he's right messy."

Luck had run out for Vince Elgin, and with the same tide it had gone out for Andy Dawson and his uncle. Even if Vince was lucky enough to get his hands on a gun, the odds were five to one, and those odds were too long for any man to buck, even if they weren't the kind of tough hands who stood before Vince. So Vince, knowing there was nothing else for him to do, played for time, and hoped for a break.

He asked, "What was the idea of trying to kill Sam Paris tonight?"

"Trying?" Welcome shouted. "You mean he ain't dead?"

Vince shook his head. "Too high."

Welcome whirled on the bearded man. "Doc, you bungling, lame-brained idiot. I should have done the job myself."

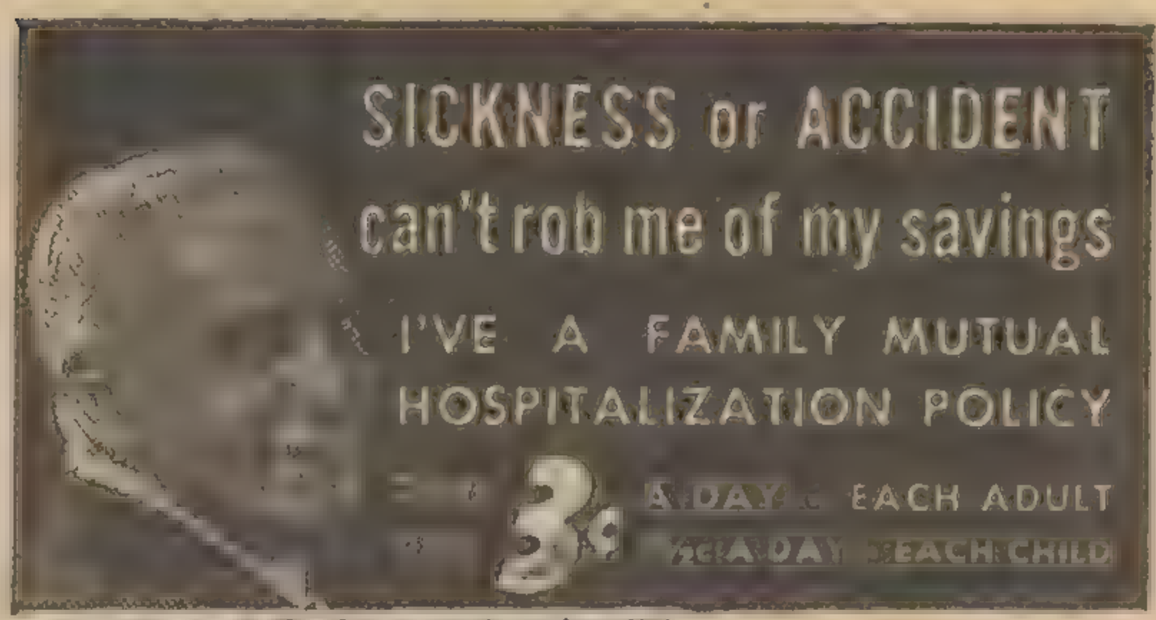
"You should have," Naylor said meaningly. "Nobody can do a killing job like you can, Walt."

WELCOME beamed with the praise. "I'll finish it, Lafe. I'll do it as soon as I get rid of this hombre." He swung back to face Vince. "We aimed to beef Paris because we want all of Red's property turned into cash. Lafe's been working on him for weeks, but Paris is too stubborn to sell. When he's out of the way, Lafe will take over. You see, Elgin, cash is what me and the boys have to have, seeing as I can't afford to stick around to get my third of Red's money.

"We had it all figgered out mighty smart if Doc hadn't scrambled it. We were gonna kidnap you out of the hotel, fix it to look like you and Paris beefed each other, and Lafe was gonna identify you as Walt Welcome. Then I could go somewhere else and be plain Sam Jones, and live real well off old Red's money. Trouble was Bascom got you out of the hotel, and Doc went ahead on Paris."

"When you're done bragging," the square-faced man called Moon said irritably, "I'd like to do the job on this yahoo. My head aches like hell."

"With Paris dead," Vince said, trying



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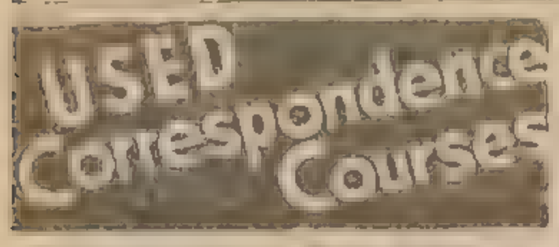

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desperately to head off what lay ahead for him, "there wouldn't be anybody in this country but Lafe and Red Hell who could identify you?"

"That's right." Welcome turned to Moon. "Go ahead, son. It's your time for fun now."

"Now about this—" Vince began.

"Shut up," Welcome snarled. "Go ahead, Moon."

The square-faced man moved around the table to a trap door in the floor. He winked at Welcome as he lifted it. He said, "You didn't think you'd be started for hell right here, did you, Elgin?" He lifted a vegetable rack that had hung below the floor, and pointed into the black hole he had uncovered. "That's where you're going, friend, and before long your pard Andy will be down there beside you."

Vince didn't understand it. He saw the expression of triumph on Moon's face, the sudden impatience that had come to Welcome. "I don't see—" Vince began.

"You don't need to see," Welcome snapped. "Throw him in, Moon. I'm going down and finish old man Paris."

"Wait a minute, Walt," Naylor said, and came around the table to where Moon stood beside the vegetable rack. "You don't want to miss any of the fun." He picked up a carrot and tossed it into the hole. "Hear that, Elgin?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Vince shook his head. "I didn't hear anything."

"What are you up to, Lafe?" Welcome demanded.

"I thought Elgin might enjoy what's going to happen to him if he knew something about this. You see, Red Hell uncovered a cave when they dug this basement for him. They blasted the lid off a hole that goes mighty close to hell just like Moon said a minute ago. There's a cool wind that comes up from the cave, so it's hard to tell where it goes to. That's why Red had this vegetable rack built. Keeps things just like an icehouse."

"All right, all right," Welcome said impatiently. "Heave him in, Moon. Mebbe he didn't hear the carrot hit, but he'll he'll sure know it when he hits."

He had come this close, Vince was thinking bitterly, and failed. By his falling, he had lost his life and Andy Dawson's and Red Hell's. Now there was nothing to do but swing a futile fist. He'd be subdued by sheer weight, or be cut

down by a bullet, and thrown into the hole that yawned before him.

"Now you don't need to be in such a damned big hurry, Walt," Naylor said in an aggrieved tone. "I tell you I've got a right to have my fun. Elgin, pick up a carrot and toss it into that hole yourself. Listen close, Mister. About five minutes after you throw mebbe you'll hear it bounce."

Lafe Naylor was trying to give Vince a chance to make a break. That much Vince saw, but how and why Vince didn't see. He stepped to the rack, and as he reached for a carrot he saw the black butt of a Colt buried among the vegetables.

IN THAT instant Walt Welcome sensed treachery on Naylor's part. He said sharply, "Hold it, Elgin. I'll do that carrot tossing myself."

Naylor had made a quick step so that his body was between Vince and Welcome. In that short interval of time while Vince was leisurely reaching into the vegetable rack, he weighed his chances and found them small. He had no way of knowing whether Naylor aimed to back his play. The gun might be loaded, or it might be only another way of having fun with a man destined soon to die.

Vince slowly reached into the rack. His fingers closed over the gun butt, and he whirled, bringing it up with lightning speed just as Welcome stepped around Naylor, and started to say, "Damn it, Elgin—" and went no farther. He glimpsed the gun in Vince's hand, and pulled his own in the fastest draw Vince had ever seen. Welcome had his gun leveled, hammer back, when Vince fired, lacing a bullet through the tall outlaw's brain.

Lafe Naylor and the bearded man had fired point-blank at each other. Both were spilling to the floor as Vince turned. Two of Welcome's men were still on their feet, the square-faced one Welcome had called Moon, and the bullet-headed one. Because they were scared and made panicky by the sudden and unexpected twist of events, their first shots missed. Then Vince was hit as he dropped hammer again, his bullet bringing a gaping hole to the top of Moon's head.

Again Vince felt the tug of lead along his upper ribs as he turned his gun on the bullet-headed man. He fired twice. That was all of it. The last of Welcome's men lurched forward and sprawled to the

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floor like a dropped sack of grain. Vince's gun dribbled out of his hand. He hung to the corner of the table for a moment, but only for a moment. Darkness boiled up around him. For the second time that night he lost consciousness here in Red Hell Dawson's house.

It was hours before Vince was conscious again; days before his head was clear and he learned from Andy the rest of the story. It was the same Andy Dawson Vince had come here to find, a little thinner than usual because his meals had been skimpy during the weeks he was held captive in Red Hell's house, but the same Andy Dawson none the less.

"Red isn't as bad off as Naylor made out," Andy said. "He may live quite a spell yet. Naylor will make it, too. You know, Vince, I've got a hunch he figured Walt aimed to beef him when everything was cleaned up, so he slipped that gun into the vegetable rack and worked it around so that he would have somebody to side him before he had to go it alone."

"I've wondered about Bascom," Vince said thoughtfully.

Andy snorted. "A hell of a lawman. He knew damned well you weren't Walt, and he didn't want to know that Walt was here in the house. Looks to me like he wanted to shove you into the jug so that the townspeople would feel safer."

"What happened to you when you got here?"

"I acted like a fool." Andy grinned wryly. "I came up here to the house and asked for Red. Lafe opened the door. We didn't know each other, and when I told him who I was, he claimed he didn't believe it. I had to go back to the hotel, and that night Walt and his bunch took me out." Andy shook his head. "It's been a hell of a time all around, son. Naylor had dropped a few hints that Walt would show up so nobody would think about him being here already. The town was edgy thinking he'd pop up, and it explains Winnie being so boogery the day you got here."

Winnie came in then, smiling, and looking even prettier than Vince had remembered her. He said, "Andy, we haven't been doing too well in Nevada. It might be a good idea to move up here and settle down."

Andy, following Vince's gaze, nodded and grinned. "I see your point of view, Vince," he said.

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